



00. 夢の始まり

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00. 夢の始まり

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Who... is it?...

Shiika

"Kakkou"

What is your dream?

Kakkou



立花利菜

Rina Tachibana

後に虫憑きのレジスタンス組織“むしばね”のリーダー“レイディー・バード”となる。



大喰い

Oogui



虫憑きを生むといわれる三体の謎めいた存在——“始まりの三匹”の一匹。自らは“エルビオレーネ”と名乗る。詩歌や利菜のような、“分離型”の虫憑きを生み出す。

浸父

Shinpu



“始まりの三匹”の一匹。自らは“ディオレストイ”と名乗る。ハルキヨや千莉のような“特殊型”の虫憑きを生み出す。

三匹目

Sanbikime



“始まりの三匹”の一匹。自らは“アリア・ヴァレイ”と名乗る。その生態は他の二匹に比べても謎が多い。大助や初季のような“同化型”の虫憑きを生み出す。

Characters of MUSHI UTA

キャラクター紹介



薬屋大助

Daisuke Kusuriya

特別環境保全事務局—特環の東中央支部局員“かっこう”。

杏本詩歌

Shiika Anmoto



その特異な能力から“ふゆほたる”と名づけられた虫憑き。

土師圭吾

Keigo Haji



特環東中央支部支部長補佐。皮肉な口調が特徴的だが、かっこうとは強い絆がある。





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ムシウタ

夢の始まり

M U S H I - U T A



Ce Light Novel Translation

SEPB's classification:

Kashu: Title given to Mushitsuki that had outstanding ability in combat. Almost all of the currently existing Mushitsuki belong to this category.

Ishu: Title given to Mushitsuki that had some sort of special ability.

Hishu: Title given to Mushitsuki that had all sort of unique condition. This title is one of the rarest, not that many was given such title in the whole series. So far Shiika is the only one that had obtained this title. (Because she's the only one that awakened from Fallen status.)

(Mushi) Types:

Minion Type: Also known as separation type whereas the Mushi would be separated from the host themselves. This is the most populated type of all, near 80% (estimated) of Mushitsuki population had this type.

Special Type: Every Mushi of this type have no physical shape of itself, but might form one when it activates its ability which would mostly likely be control of certain medium within its territory. IE: Fire, electricity, gravity, etc.

Fusion Type: The rarest type of all. The Mushi of this type would fuse itself with Mushitsuki's body + weapon to activate its ability and further grant super human strength, speed, and durability to its host.

Enjoy ~

-Wing

0.00

Shiika Part 1

From an unknown far distance came waves of irregular clattering sound. Even though the time was near dusk, the sound of construction could still be heard everywhere within the rapidly-developing Ouka City.

The Ouka City's residents were already accustomed to this kind of noisy daily life; even Shiika, who's in the final winter of her sixth grade, was feeling the same. While hearing the noise that came from somewhere, Shiika continued to walk on her way home from school --- a view like this, didn't appear only during the freezing Decembers, it had never changed ever since she entered elementary school.

Shiika breathed out a cloud of white mist, and deftly bypassed the corner where a red mailbox was standing.

Due to the sudden increase of residents in this area in the past few weeks, the numbers of buildings had naturally increased along. As a result, the path Shiika took to school had also become more tortuous and winding.

The freezing winter breeze began to blow.

Shiika involuntarily shrank her neck, and stopped in her tracks. The long hair that she emulated after her bigger sister, and her beloved white scarf that she begged her dad to buy, were being blown into a mess by the cold wind. Even her book bag couldn't escape the ravage of the gale, and the books and supplies that were inside the book bag were being rocked back and forth, making "Kacha Kacha" noises.

"Ah..."

After the gale had passed, in front of Shiika, who was preparing to take a step forward, appeared a person.

No. Shiika at first didn't realize that the figure that was bathing in the reddening ray of the sunset in front of her was a person.

But, it was indeed a person. And that person was a woman wearing a deep red over-knee overcoat, while carrying a fine leather handbag. Her slightly smiling face looked very dignified, but at the same time, her meticulous smile made her look like an icy wooden doll. However, the thing that attracted Shiika the most, was a pair of round sunglasses that the woman was wearing.

The sunglasses that were reflecting the rays were no doubt facing Shiika's direction.

Shiika at first thought that this woman was a ghost or some sort because she didn't know when in time did this woman first appear, and not to mention her presence was very weak to a point that --- even if she suddenly vanished right now, Shiika wouldn't even feel strange at all. Shiika was not afraid of her, but just couldn't get her gaze off this woman.

The construction noise that had been continuing along unknowingly stopped.

“Hello, could you tell me your dream?”

The woman spoke.

Shiika was startled, before suddenly coming back to her senses. The sound that came flowing into her ears by the friction of air particles was no doubt real. In other words, the woman in front of her was not a ghost right?

“Uh, uhmm...”

After realizing that the other party was human, Shiika became even more afraid. Her mind suddenly collapsed into a mashed mess, completely forgetting the question the other party just asked.

On seeing the teenage girl’s restless look, the woman seemed to be interested as she continued to gaze at her.

Finally, Shiika calmed down before remembering what action she needs to take under this kind of situation, and turned her back facing the woman.

But, just at the instant when Shiika was about to run away, the woman’s voice stopped her in her tracks once again.

“You don’t have to be afraid.”

As if she was being seduced by the voice, Shiika slowly turned around facing the woman.

“I just wanted to ask you, that’s all. It seems like you have a rather delicious dream, yet you’re just staying in place, not doing anything at all.”

“My... dream?...”

Shiika’s gaze and the woman’s gaze, overlapped.

The woman smiled slightly as she lowered her head and gradually leaned towards Shiika. The pupils that were shining a brilliant glow behind her pairs of sunglasses captured Shiika’s heart, and drove away her fear.

Meanwhile, Shiika could feel her chest being filled by a tiny dream that would make her feel very happy whenever she thinks about it.

A dream that Shiika had always, always carefully treasured in the bottom of her heart.

“My...dream is... to---“

The corner of the woman’s lip rose slightly, which deepened her smile. At the same time, atop her shoulder, a swallowtail with gorgeous colorful wings suddenly took flight.

1.00

Shiika Part 2

The hexagonal crystal flowers, that were dancing down slowly, enveloped Shiika as she stood alone amidst the vast snowfield. The only thing she could see, were the never ending snowflakes falling down one after another; it was as if they were trying to dye the world in white.

It made her feel like she was the only one left in this world.

“No one... else is here...”

Shiika’s hopeless mutter was swallowed by the strong blizzard before it could even resonate through the air.

However, just then, Shiika suddenly felt there was a presence at the far distance of this snowfield.

Beautiful long hair, accompanied by a mature look despite her being a junior high student --- it was Shiika’s older sister.

“Onee---...”

Just when Shiika opened her mouth, her sister turned and glanced at her, before disappearing into the horizon of the snowy field almost instantly.

Immediately followed after that were the figures of Shiika’s parents, but they also vanished right after as well.

Shiika then realized: she was all alone... Everyone else besides her had disappeared from this world.

Without a reason, they just disappeared.

While thinking, she suddenly felt a presence of “something” coming from behind.

Slowly turning around, a giant white-colored insect was coming straight at her. Shiika couldn’t even resist as the firefly-like creature wrapped its legs around her. While being seized by it, a transparent tear fell down from her cheek.

Because it was then, she realized --- the reason why everyone disappeared... why she was left all alone... It was all because she --- was no longer a “human” anymore.....

Slowly opening her eyes, the familiar white-colored ceiling came into her view.

The mind that had just awakened from a chaotic state was gradually returning to normal, meanwhile her skin could finally feel the warm sensation of the pillow and blanket that wrapped around her.

“Mmm...”

Sitting up from the soft mattress, she slowly rubbed her eyes. The fingertip that wiped back and forth along her eyes was slightly wet. Recalling the dream she just had, Shiika could not help but slightly bite her lips. Her heartbeat seemed to not have returned to normal yet.

“Oh! Shiika, you woke up already?”

The sound of a door opening came as a teenage girl’s head poked her head into the room through the slightly opened gap.

Despite being the same figure as the one from the dream, her smile was more much vivid and lovelier in reality by tenfold. It was Shiika’s older sister --- Kazuha. She was already wearing her well-ironed junior high uniform, even her beautiful long hair was done meticulously.

“Mhm... Good morning, Onee-chan.”

The awakened Shiika greeted her sister with a vague tone --- Kazuha knew Shiika didn’t like alarms, hence she would personally come and wake her up every morning.

“Your eyes are kind of red, are you okay?”

“Mm, I just rubbed them a little.”

“I see, well, hurry come downstairs and get ready for school!”

“Mm.....”

It was the same morning as usual, and Shiika prepared herself for school just the same.

Washing her face, changing her clothes, fixing her hair, before arriving at the table filled with breakfast and sat down.

Every side of the table sat a person; the 42 year old father who worked as a civil servant, the full-time housewife mother, the sister who was older by 2 years and currently in the 2nd grade of a private junior high school, and lastly Shiika who’s in 6th grade.

As always, the family’s breakfast topic centered on her sister Kazuha.

“Kazuha, you told me before that you’re planning on skiing with your friends during winter vacation right? Are those friends reliable? Trustworthy??”

“Mom, what do you mean by that!? I told you already, they are just my normal classmates!”

"I'm just worried! Since there won't be any guardian going along... and all of you guys are just junior high students!"

"No parents would worry about such things nowadays! Don't you and Dad feel that your way of thinking is way too old-school now? A civil servant and the daughter of rich family, I guess it can't be helped."

"I don't care what other parents do. Nonetheless, you must call home at least once every night, got that?"

"I know, I know~ If this goes on, I'll be stressed before I even go... Oh yeah Shiika, is there anything that you want as a souvenir?"

"Uh, anything is fine."

Kazuha was a very intelligent girl, not to mention well-mannered and cheerful at that. Not only Shiika, who thought of her sister as beautiful, almost all the people around them were fond of her. Even the fact that their parents were more focused on Kazuha and her bright future was well-known within the Anmoto's family.

However, Shiika never hated her parents or sister because of that. On the contrary, Shiika was very fond and proud of having this clever yet beautiful girl as her sister. Hence, when Shiika found out that she would be going to a different junior high school from her sister next year she was feeling rather down for a while.

However, Shiika recently had been thinking about something else.

To her, the Anmoto's household was like a planet that revolves only around Kazuha. If so, even if one day Shiika were to disappear, this planet would no doubt continue its daily life without any change, and in addition ---

Whenever she thought up to there, she had to immediately halt her mind from imagining any further. Because, not only was it pointless, it was also terrifying as well.

"Oh my god, it's those (Mushi) again!"

"...!"

Oh hearing her mother screaming that line out while watching TV, Shiika could not help but twitch her hands for an instant and dropped the bowl she was holding. The soup inside the bowl immediately spilled on her side of the table that was filled with tableware.

"What are you doing?!"

"S-Sorry!"

Shiika became even more panicked after being scolded by her father. She hurriedly went into the kitchen to find a rag to clean the table with; while cleaning the table she apologized continuously with a hoarse tone. But due to her being too flustered, she dirtied other tableware during the cleaning process.

Kazuha hurriedly came to her sister's side and helped out, while telling her mother this:

"Mom, hurry up and change the channel! These news of "Mushi" and the like, are nothing but fantasy fabricated from those silly people's mind."

"But... just thinking about the fact that these monsters might be lurking around us, makes me feel uneasy!"

"That's why I always tell you, don't listen or do whatever people say! Those pictures that are being show on the TV right now, are nothing but computer graphics, okay?"

The so-called (Mushi) --- were abnormal creatures that had been going around in rumors for a few years already. Furthermore, these mysterious insects were said to be able to devour human's dream and hope.

The government didn't acknowledge (Mushi)'s existence. But in reality, while rumors regarding (Mushi) had been spreading throughout the public like wildfire, more and more witnesses regarding such creatures began to increase as well, proving that these monsters --- actually exist.

Even though many had different options regarding their size and appearance, there was one thing that they all shared in common: (Mushi) would infest on humans, and feast on their hopes, desires --- and the most crucial, their "dreams". Those humans that were infested by (Mushi) were called hosts, which were also known as Mushitsuki, and teenagers were the main targets of infection. In addition, (Mushi) would not only devour their dreams. As a remuneration of preying on the host's dreams, (Mushi) would spare its strength to the host, and listen to their commands. However, should Mushitsuki attempt to kill the (Mushi) that was infesting them, they would also destroy their dreams in the process, which would result in them losing their will to live and become "Fallen". Moreover, even if one didn't kill the (Mushi) infesting on them, they would sooner or later come to their end from having their dreams completely devouring by the (Mushi) and die. In other words, once one became a Mushitsuki, he or she would not be able to escape from sharing the same fate as the (Mushi).

Although above were nothing but rumors and urban legends going around right now, witnesses and testimony were constantly increasing and spreading like ripples, which slowly plant seeds of fear into general public's hearts.

"I'm off to school~"

Due to the morning training from the extracurricular activities that she participated in, Kazuha always had to leave 1 hour earlier. Around the same time, after packing the textbooks needed for that day's lecture, Shiika carried her heavy book bag and left home as well.

The morning's breeze was freezing cold today. And the path leading to school was the same as usual, filled with turns and windings.

There were many other students and officer workers rushing past her, who was walking in small steps, on the road like fishes in the ocean.

Very soon, she arrived at the spot where students from her elementary school would gather every morning before going to school together. But amidst the group, Shiika didn't talk to anyone. She was very shy, and lacked self-confidence. That was why, ever since she entered 1st grade, she had been walking this tortuous path to school quietly all alone by herself every day.

After bypassing another corner after corner, Shiika arrived at the spot where she met the mysterious round sunglasses-woman from yesterday.

"....."

Of course, there wasn't any woman wearing a red overcoat standing there anymore.

Shiika then pressed against her chest lightly.

The encounter with the mysterious woman should be forever hidden deep inside her heart --- Shiika bit her lips, and told herself that.

Stepping over the school's gate, Shiika entered the classroom following the flow.

The students in the classroom were already forming groups, chitchatting and laughing about the news or drama that they've seen yesterday, giving off laughter from time to time. Facing the invisible wall formed from the laughter, Shiika walked quietly past them. The surrounding classmates continued as if they completely didn't notice her presence, not a single person greeted Shiika.

"It's time for class, everyone return to your seat quickly."

The teacher appeared at the door, and started another ordinary day with a majestic tone.

The classroom became noisy for a while as the students hurried back to their seats. But amidst this clamorous closed space, there was an isolated quiet world and Shiika was sitting all alone by herself in the center of it.

While dazing off during the lecture, Shiika began to recall the encounter from yesterday.

--- Could you tell me your dream?

Upon being asked by a strange woman shrouded in a mysterious aura, with such a strange question. Shiika replied truthfully:

My Dream is to... ..

When did it start?... When did Shiika start harboring this little tiny dream by herself? Even she herself didn't know.

She actually didn't dislike the lifestyle she's in right now.

She had already been used to the family life that centered on her sister Kazuha. Even though at school she wasn't able to get together with her classmates, she wasn't bullied by them as well.

However, somewhere among the forgotten time, Shiika had started harboring a dream that belongs only to herself. This dream gradually took root deep inside, and grew to an existence that was more precious than everything else.

But, the cost to reveal this secret... was just too big.

Shiika subconsciously shifted her gaze at the view outside of the window as if she was waiting for something. Just then, an unseasonably small insect swiftly appeared into her view. It was a pure-white, with an appearance similar to a firefly-like, insect.

Shiika immediately averted her gaze as she squeezed her tiny fists... ..

Before she knew it, the school bell echoed melodiously, signaling the end of another day.

Shiika collected the textbooks and notebooks that were scattered across her table into her book bag, and quietly walked out of the classroom.

And just at that instant ---

"Bye bye!~"

"Mm?"

A farewell that came out of nowhere startled Shiika. Turning around, it was a girl in the same class. She was waving her hand while walking towards the door. This girl wasn't particularly a good friend to Shiika, but would occasionally greet Shiika whenever she was alone.

"Mm... Bye bye..."

Shiika showed a shy yet polite smile before walking out of the classroom in a hurry. Her steps were no doubt lighter than this morning's, it was as if she was drowning in happiness, dancing shyly to herself.

After walked quite a distance away from the school gate along the national highway, Shiika suddenly heard laughter coming from behind her.

Turning her neck back a bit, she immediately noticed that those were the girls that were from her class.

She then hurriedly turn around and refocused her gaze at the view in front, trying to avoid eye contact, but was suddenly stunned in a daze before she could do that.

One of the girls that was frolicking --- which was the girl that said "Bye bye" to Shiika before she left the classroom , accidentally stepped on the peddle on the road and tripped. Worst of all, the direction she was tripping towards, was a guardrail-less crossroad.

At the same time, a sharp car-braking sound came into her ears ---

--- Could you tell me your dream?

For some reason, the image of the sunglasses-wearing woman suddenly flashed through her mind.

Above Shiika, a tiny dazzling white light began to descend slowly.

Kakkou Part 1

Right after the boy walked out of the school gate with his friends, he immediately noticed a black car that was parked on the other side of the national highway.

And just when he fixed his gaze on the car, the car's door silently opened.

Coming out from the driver's seat was a young man showing a faint smile; it was someone that the boy was familiar with --- or perhaps over-familiar to a point where he even started to feel tired of seeing it. Below the young man's smile was a set of expensive suit that he always wears, however today he changed from wearing the usual gloomy black color to a not-so-gloomy gray instead.

"Sorry guys, I suddenly remembered that I have something to do. I guess I can't go playing with you guys today.

The boy squeezed a friendly smile onto his face as he apologized to his friends.

"Eh? You're not going? What about your character then?"

"Yeah man! We're a party, remember?! We can't just ditch you and just level up by ourselves can we? Besides, it'd be hard without your character's healing magic."

"Then let Kinoshita replaces me! Didn't you say you wanted to try this game out the other day?"

"Eh-?! I'm not confident enough to play it well! What if I get it killed?!"

"It's okay, just save the file ahead of time. Sorry guys, I really have something to do today! I'll definitely go with you all tomorrow, I promise!"

The boy left his friends that were still complaining and ran towards the car.

Even though the young man was waving his hand at him, he didn't have the slightest intention of waving back. And even if "Immediately wave back" was an order, he would resist to follow it with all of his might.

"Hey, (Kakkou), you're getting along pretty well with your friends eh? That's good to know."

The young man that was leaning against the car greeted the boy. Despite being an adult that was just a little over twenty, the outfit of his personal-made suit looked rather really well on him. However, the merits of his slender body figure with a handsome look were offset completely by his pale expression and frivolous smile. The fact that his body's condition was unwell was already a norm to the boy, so there was nothing to worry about.

Haji Keigo. Although on the surface he worked in some government agency as an officer, he was also this boy's "Supervisor".

"What's the problem, Keigo?"

The sky was covered heavily by thick clouds, which gave a feeling as if the whole world was rendered by a layer of freezing white.

He questioned the other party in a tone that was completely different when he was talking to his friends.

"Didn't I tell you to not come near school if it's not an emergency?"

"Compared to the honor-student looks you give in school, I actually like this childish looks of yours better. Also this style of talking, will definitely make girls fall for you, you know?"

He --- (Kakkou) ignored the young man's sarcasm unhappily.

Of course, the name (Kakkou) was not his real name. In school he was called by his normal name. With average height and an emotionless expression, medium-length black hair, combined with scarf and jacket that could be bought anywhere. And to top it off, He had a common look and quite a sociable personality.

However, every bit of these was for the sake of allowing him to integrate into the surroundings at any given situation, which was solely taught by the young man in front. Hence, the fact that the young man was saying lines like "his original personality suits him better", fully proved that he had a rather hateful character.

But no matter what he said, (Kakkou) is still a 12 year old boy currently enrolled in public elementary school. If one must insist, the only special trait about him would probably be the Band-Aid that was on his cheek.

"Enough talking, just tell me what are you here for. Ah, is today a training day?"

"Nope, the training is already over."

(Kakkou) frowned as a tiny green colored creature descended slowly onto his shoulder. It was an insect that looked similar to a Cleridae but had a pair of long antennae instead. The Kakkou Mushi was beating its wings as if it was feeling the chill of the December breeze.

Just then, Haji reached out a black object towards him. It was a huge pair of mechanical goggles.

"It's your turn, (Kakkou). From this moment onwards, I officially declare you as the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau East Central Division Combat Squad's no-ranked Mushitsuki."

(Kakkou) gazed back silently at the young man.

In other people's eyes, the two of them might've seemed as if they were glaring at each other and about to start a fight or something. The green Kakkou Mushi that was resting on the boy's shoulder was looking back and forth between the two.

"....."

(Kakkou) then reached out his hand, and took the goggles from the young man. Upon feeling that heavy ice cold sensation, (Kakkou) immediately felt disgusted by it. From that instant, he was sure that he could never bring himself to like this thing.

"I'm also appointed as the East Central Division branch director assistant today, so it'll be a debut for both of us."

"...Who's the opponent?"

"A Mushitsuki that was discovered merely two hours ago, currently codenamed as (Fuyuhotaru) -- A strong opponent that wiped out dozens of members in an instant."

"Why do I have to take on such monster for my first mission..."

"From a normal human's perspective, you Mushitsuki makes no different to them. Monsters are monsters, it doesn't matter what shape or form they take."

(Kakkou) became silent.

Haji's words, did not have the slightest tenderness or concern mixed within. What he just said was a well-known truth anyway. To those who were living peacefully in their ordinary lives, Mushitsuki were nothing but symbol of fear, an existence that should not have existed in this world. Even (Kakkou) knew that very well.

"However, there's something that's even uglier than you monsters existed in this world."

Haji didn't change his expression, and said in a relaxed tone.

"...? What do you mean?"

"You'll find out really soon."

The man named Haji Keigo would never go easy on Mushitsuki or have any compassion for them. And at the same time --- he would not have the slightest fear of them as well. It was these that (Kakkou) relied on to distinguish him from other adults.



"The place where we've located (Fuyuhotaru) is within this Ouka City, which is East Central Division's territory. Just as I have mentioned before, the combat squad that went to capture the target was wiped out in an instant. Hence, all the SEPB branches, including the headquarters, have decided to establish an emergency reinforcement squad that consists of nearly hundreds of ranked Mushitsuki, to come here. They should be here very shortly. The one who's responsible of leading them is a Kashu level three ranked Mushitsuki (Namie). Although it hasn't been made publicly known within the SEPB yet, (Namie) is actually East Central Division branch director's ---which is our boss Takakuwa Azuma's daughter."

"Close to hundreds of ranked members...? Although I don't know how it usually works, shouldn't this kind of large lineup be handled by a headquarters' member?"

It seemed like that so-called (Fuyuhotaru) was indeed quite a powerful foe.

If just ranked Mushitsuki alone had reached this number, then there was no doubt that there were several folds more no-ranked members than this.

Haji lifted the corner of his lip, and laughed ironically:

"Bribery, glory, struggle for power..... even in times like this, these silly things till can't be avoided. And this is what Takakuwa branch director is best at."

"Mm... Well, it has nothing to do with me anyway."

"You'll be enrolled into a standby squad that led solely by the East Central Division, a squad that doesn't belong to the reinforcement lineup. It's a special force that takes action if the target escapes the surrounding formation lead by (Namie)'s force. If that were to happen, the residents living in the area probably won't have enough time to escape; therefore the standby squad would probably have to battle it out in the streets."

"Escape the surrounding formation...? Just ranked members alone number in the hundreds, is that even possible?"

Facing the laughing (Kakkou), Haji replied casually:

"If you were (Fuyuhotaru), would you give up obediently just because you have to face over hundreds of enemies?"

"....."

"The dream you're harboring, is not something that you can easily give up like that right?"

(Kakkou) subconsciously strengthened his grip on the goggles as his past memories began to resurface in his mind like a flash.

He then remembered the day when he came home --- and it was empty.

In the room where his family had suddenly disappeared, he was standing there dazed and alone.

The feeling of loneliness that enveloped him at that time, the smell of dust in the apartment where there was nothing left.

Looking out of the window, he could still see the figures of his mother and sister who had abandoned him. Although his sister turned around and glanced at him for a moment, she still held onto her mother's hand and left in hurry.

He was not needed anymore ---

It was because he clearly understood this that he did not go and chase after them. Whether to the mother who raised them single-handedly, or to the naturally frail sister, his existence was nothing but a heavy burden.

Because he understood--- at that instant, he had already become a Mushitsuki.

--- But even for someone like me, there must be a place out there --- a place of belonging that needs me...

It was an incident that happened one year ago.

He couldn't even shed a tear as he watched his mother and sister gradually disappear away into the distance, while praying intensively for his dream to come true in his heart.

He could never forget the feeling from that time.

Even if he had to face hundreds of enemies --- he wouldn't give up until he realized this one and only dream of his.

"Are you kidding me ---"

(Kakkou) glared at the young man with his burning eyes.

"Who's gonna give up just because of that...!"

Haji Keigo then shifted his gaze to look at the gradually increasing pedestrians that were walking on the streets due to the sunset and breathed a blow of white mist:

"Yeah, perhaps (Fuyuhotaru) will not give up, just like you. Those Mushitsuki that will never give up their dreams are the strongest after all, even stronger than hundreds of foes..."

"..."

"Anyway, you should head towards your pre-assigned position right now. The designated location is saved as map data in that goggles' memory slot. I heard that branch director Takakuwa will lurking around to survey the situation. But other than that, there's nothing important. I have something to do elsewhere later on, so this is where we will part ways."

"Eh? Aren't you branch director's assistant? Shouldn't you be around the branch director?"

A grin then slowly appeared onto Haji's face. Every time when he saw him with this expression, nothing good ever happened.

"What are you planning this time?"

"What a pity, you guessed wrong this time. The one who's planning something is not me."

"Huh? Can you say something that's more understandable when talking to me?"

Haji smiled as he leaned his hand onto the car's door.

"I've set a direct channel that allows you to talk to me using that goggles' wireless connection. If anything happens, you must contact me immediately okay?"

"Yeah yeah, I got it."

"Reply only once."

"Yes sir."

".....Recently. Maybe it was because my sister has gotten used to seeing you acting that way, even she has started giving me that kind of attitude from time to time. What a pain in the neck, that's my biggest stress nowadays you know?"

Of course, it was because I deliberately taught her that! --- (Kakkou) laughed as he made a face to the young man within his mind.

Haji sat in his car, and closed the door. And then, he placed one of his hands onto the gearstick and moved his index next to his forehead to salute:

"I wish you good luck, (Kakkou). For the sake of protecting your dream, please work hard."

"Although I don't know what are you scheming, but same to you branch director assistant."

The two of them exchanged smile for an instant, before each heading towards to their respective places.

The Others

The streetscape that came into the view through the black goggles, gave an unrealistic feeling as if one was looking at another world.

The smile of pedestrians walking by under the sunset, began to overlap with her expression that was reflected from the glass window.

The long hair that was supposed be there, was cut last week for the reason of making it easier to move for her. Covering her eyes and nose, was a pair of mechanical goggles. Her slender lips was fixed in place with a “—”shape, just like a doll.

Those who knew her identity probably wouldn't have recognized her if they were to see her current self. Even she herself felt that way too. There was no way that this figure, who was currently wearing a heavy long coat and a pair of giant mechanical goggles that blocked half of her expression and, looked like a 17 year old teenage girl.

“Minori.”

Sitting on the back seat of a Mercedes-Benz that was speeding on the highway, a middle-aged man who sat next to her spoke:

Takakuwa Minori turned around, and saw that the man was glaring at her with a pair of sharp eyes.

She, however, wasn't moved by this. The fact that this man would show such expression no matter what kind of situation he faced— Minori understood this more than anyone else. Over the past few years, she had never seen him smile even once.

Takakuwa Azuma --- The man who's currently holding the position of the East Central Division branch director under an organization called the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. And at the same time --- her biological father. With his combed back hairstyle and sharp glaring eyes, he always emitted a domineering atmosphere around him.

There were only Takakuwa Azuma, Takakuwa Minori, and the driver in the car.

“This country is over already...”

Takakuwa Azuma said in a low suppressed tone.

“It has already been a few years since these dream-devouring (Mushi) appeared... But over the past few years, what has this country done? Other than creating this ambiguous organization, the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, in order to conceal (Mushi)'s existence and furthermore capture them?”

In order to capture and conceal the existence of (Mushi), which were hidden from the public, this country had once used conventional weapons to fight against them. But because they couldn't fully cope with the (Mushi)'s vast array of abilities, they decided to take another approach.

Using Mushitsuki to capture Mushitsuki.

And the organization created especially for this purpose, was the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

It was abbreviated as SEPB by most people, and its main function was to train the captured Mushitsuki, and then militarize them in order to capture other rogue Mushitsuki. Those Mushitsuki who worked under SEPB were grouped into various squads that suited their specialty; the Combat Squad, the Intel Squad, the Inspector Squad etc. Those who defied the rules— would get their (Mushi) killed and turned into Fallen.

In addition, Mushitsuki were classified into different ranks according to their ability and strength. Those that had outstanding ability in combat were called "Kashu", those that had a rare ability of some sort were classified as "Ishu", and lastly those that had a unique condition that must be concealed were called "Hishu". Furthermore, they were ranked on a scale ranging from 1 to 10 according to the strength of their ability; those that weren't even able pass the requirement for the lowest level 10 rank were called as "No-rank".

Takakuwa Minori was classified as a Kashu level three ranked --- in the current SEPB, such rank was considered almost the strongest.

"This country...has too many incompetents that aren't even worth mentioning. Yet, each and single one of them harbor things that many have desired for. Money, status, and (Mushi)... the authorities that rule over these right now, are completely corrupted. Their existences are the ones that should be overthrown; we must replace them with suitable candidates chosen by the supreme law. Do you understand, Minori?"

"Yes, father."

The Takakuwa family was a Windsor arch that had been taking roles in positions that supported the country every generation. Back at Minori's place of origin, there were many portraits of her ancestors that were hailed as heroes. She was raised in that kind of environment.

Even so, the person that she respected the most was still her father. Up till now, her father had always stood victorious no matter what kind of dreaded situations he faced, and protected this country. As a result, the Takakuwa family received honor that was never obtained before; its authority even reached the root that supported this country.

"This country has already forgotten justice. I cannot allow that to happen, do you understand?"

Takakuwa Azuma reached his hand, and caressed Minori's hair as he said that.



“Yes.....”

Feeling the hard sensation coming from his touch, Minori narrowed her eyes and nodded. The feel of her father’s sturdy yet warm hand was her favorite. At the same time to her, who was always isolated from those around her due to her status, it was her only consolation as well.

“The power that you have obtained, it exists for the purpose of fulfilling the Takakuwa family’s role. As a proof, you’re stronger than anyone else. It’s your mission to help me correct this country, and put it back right on track.”

“Yes.”

From the nodding Minori’s hair, appeared a white-colored butterfly.

Its appearance looked very similar to an Appias Paulina, but the delicate patterns on its wings were completely different than the normal one. In addition, the shape of its wings gave a sharper feeling as well, and its body was much slender.

Just then, from within Takakuwa Azuma’s pocket rang the sound of a cellphone’s ringtone.

“It’s me --- no problem, that’s within my expectation. The reinforcement sent by each division... Yes. I understand. Sent the correct location to (Namie)’s goggles. I’ll directly be in charge of the East Central Division’s force.”

(Namie) --- That was Takakuwa Minori’s alias given by the SEPB. It was named after the (Mushi) --- [Namie Shirochou] that was resting on Minori’s shoulder.

“I have long expected this day to come... the day when an overwhelmingly strong Mushitsuki appears.”

Ending his talks with that line, Takakuwa Azuma put away his cellphone.

“The capture target this time, has already defeated two entire Combat Squad divisions. From this point onward, we decided to alias the capture target as (Fuyuhotaru), and at the same time classify the target as an Ishu level three ranked Mushitsuki. That should be the highest ranked title ever given to an Ishu if I remembered correctly. In other words, including you, there should be less than a handful that could stand a chance against her.”

“Then ---”

Minori’s heart began to race as nervousness and excitement suddenly filled her heart.

Just at that instant, Takakuwa Azuma showed a smile --- upon seeing his smile, Minori could not help but gasp. In her eyes, her father’s long lost smile was always so stunning and striking.

“Aaah, the time has finally come. Minori, you’ll be leading the unified squad consisting of all the reinforcements that came from other Divisions and the Headquarters. You have to make them all work

together and focus all of the SEPB's firepower onto (Fuyuhotaru). I'll be leading the East Central Division."

"Me leading the unified squad...? Rather than the East Central Division?"

"It's a strong Mushitsuki that we have never ever encountered before. No matter which division it is, they all want to capture this Mushitsuki whilst paying the least casualties and claim her for their division. And precisely because of this, each division is willing to send their strongest members to gather here. And I deliberately accepted their requests while demanding that the unified squad must be led by an East Central Division member as a condition. And you, are the only one that's capable of leading the unified squad that consists of all of the SEPB's main forces."

"Are we going to capture (Fuyuhotaru) --- and make her one of us?"

"Didn't I say it before? I have already expected one day such strong Mushitsuki will appear. If you harbor such naïve thoughts and think that you can capture her, you're most likely to get yourself kill. That's why, you must bear the intention of killing the other party and fight."

"....."

"Although it is only for a while, I still feel uneasy letting you go alone like this."

Takakuwa Azuma's hand again caressed Minori's cheek. Just this warm sensation alone, was enough to blow away all of the confusion Minori had in her mind.

"Even if my plan were to succeed, I cannot allow (Fuyuhotaru), such an uncertain factor, to stay alive and threaten our country. You're the only one that can defeat (Fuyuhotaru), Minori. The duty to protect this country, must be fulfilled by the Takakuwa Family."

"...Yes, father."

Being stroked by her father, Minori nodded her head forcefully. As long as this sensation stayed with her, she felt like she had the courage to face any kind of situation. And no matter what kind of enemy she came across, she would definitely be able to continue realizing her dream --- the dream to protect this country.

Accompanied by a weak electronic sound, an image suddenly appeared onto the lens of the goggles that Minori was wearing. On the Ouka City's map that appeared, there was a route that lit up; it must be (Fuyuhotaru)'s escape route.

"Kashu level three ranked member (Namie), will be taking charge of the unified squad, for the sake of defeating this country's enemy --- (Fuyuhotaru)."

"Good girl. I'm looking to your good work. Minori."

On Takakuwa Azuma's expression, smile emerged once again.

2.00

Shiika Part 3

Just what in the world had happened, even Shiika herself didn't know.

She just wanted to save the classmate in front of her from getting run over by the car.

But ---

In her view, everything was so completely destroyed that one couldn't even tell what they were from looking at their shapes anymore.

The asphalt surface was upheaved; the cars on the road stopped moving from falling into the cracks of the road. The street lamps were twisted, and many wire poles were snapped in half as well. The sound of water spraying out from the broken underground pipes was blending amidst the constant cries of surrounding pedestrians.

Her classmate, whom was sitting among the debris, was gazing at Shiika with a stunned expression.

"Mon...Monster..."

On hearing the classmate's mumble, Shiika immediately widened her eyes.

Monster.

The girl, who muttered this line, was no doubt looking straight at Shiika.

There was no mistaking it. That pair of eyes which soaked with fear --- was giving off a gaze of rejection mixed with disgust and tremor.

"I ---"

Shiika subconsciously gave off a hoarse cry before a white glowing light slowly floated above her.

A giant snow white-colored firefly was floating above Shiika.

--- Could you tell me your dream?

After the dream-like encounter with the round sunglasses wearing flirtatious woman, and answered her

question, Shiika immediately fell unconscious. By the time she awakened in those deserted streets, “this” was already infested in her.

(Mushi) ---

The Shiika who has spoken her dream, had become a Mushitsuki.

She originally thought everything will be fine as long as she kept it as a secret, and hide it inside her heart for the rest of her life.

It was supposed to be that way --- But

“(Mushi)...! It’s a (Mushi)! Run!”

“She’s a Mushitsuki!! Someone call the cops!”

People were crying in fear as they hurriedly distanced themselves away from Shiika.

“N-No... I’m not a ---”

Shiika muttered in a weak voice, as she walked one step closer to her classmate.

But ---

“G-Get away from me---!”

The classmate cried a terrified moan as she crawled away from Shiika.

Upon seeing this scene, Shiika subconsciously stopped in her tracks. It was as if the time had stopped in place, causing her mind to go blank.

What...is happening...?

She tried to ponder with a completely empty mind.

Till now, she had never been the center of attention before, she had always been living a peaceful life. Although at home she was often scolded by her parents, and she didn’t have any friends at school, she still hoped to continue living this kind of peaceful life.

It was true that she sometime felt chafed by this kind of lifestyle.

And precisely so, it was then she began to harbor this tiny wish within her.

A wish that was so insignificant that it couldn't even be called a dream.

She had only confided this trivial wish once.

And as a result of that, everyone was now fleeing in fear, hoping to get away from her as far as possible.

She originally thought that the scene happening in front of her was just a nightmare, but the crying and screaming surrounding her and the sensation of feeling "connected" to the (Mushi) floating above her forcefully pulled Shiika back into the reality.

Things like these... I never wanted it to turn out this way --- !

Just then, next to the trembling Shiika, came the sound of police sirens.

She abruptly came back to her senses, and surveyed the surroundings.

The pedestrians, which were gazing at Shiika at a distance, had eyes clearly filled with fear.

".....!"

Rather than calling it fleeing, it was more like she was afraid of staying there, hence she began to run.

"St-Stop following me.....!"

The white-colored firefly flew towards Shiika, who was desperately trying to get away. Although Shiika tried to use her hands to make it go away, the faint glowing firefly easily dodged her arms.

"Stop following me, go somewhere else ---!"

Shiika burst into tears as she shouted. But the firefly still continued to follow her while gazing inconceivably at her.

Subconsciously, Shiika ran towards the direction of her home. Because of the events that happened which threw her into chaos, her rationality was driving her body to escape to somewhere that she thinks is safe.

"Uuu...Uuu....."

Upon seeing the crying Shiika running pass by, the pedestrians all gave cries of fear as they ran for their lives.

“W-What was that?! Hey, isn’t that a ---“

“Kyaa---! I-It’s a (Mushi).....!”

In order to escape from the surrounding cries, Shiika ran as fast as she could. Even though she was already panting heavily, and her heart felt like it was about to burst, the fact, that she was feared by others, was much more painful than those combined.

Why...? Why does it have to turn out like this.....?

While she was running, these questions had been going wild in her mind.

Why does it have to be her out of everyone to be infested by this terrifying (Mushi)? All she ever did was answer a question asked by the sunglasses woman. Why did it turn out like this?

Her stamina had slowly reached its limit, which caused her running speed to become as slow as her walking pace. But even so, Shiika was still trying her best to run home.

After running for almost an hour, she finally arrived to some place where she could see her house.

In front of the house, there were the figures of her parents and sister. When they saw Shiika, they all widened their eyes.

“Shiika!”

Her sister, Kazuha, was running towards her.

“Dad, Mom.....Onee-chan...!”

Shiika was running towards them as well, but upon seeing her parent’s reaction, she subconsciously stopped. Her mother hugged Kazuha from behind to stop her while her father rushed in front of them and spread his arms as if he was guarding them.

“D-Dad...? Mom...?”

“S-Stop! D-Don’t come over here!”

“...Eh?”

At that instant, her mind went completely blank. She could not understand the words that her parents just said; it was as if her rationality had stopped working.

“W-Wait... What are you guys doing! Let me go! Shiika she---!”

Just when Kazuha was struggling to get free from her parents, an abnormality suddenly occurred.

Coming out from every direction and corner of the residential streets, was a group of figures cloaked in strange outfits.

Those figures were wearing pitch dark long coats, and huge goggles that cover their faces. Coming out of the alleys, other side of the walls, appearing on the roof of buildings... There were more than a dozen of them in total.

“W-What is going?! Those guys! Don’t tell me... Dad did you call them?!”

“I-I only called the police after the school had contacted me! That’s all!”

Ignoring the confounded family, a figure standing on the roof suddenly spoke:

“Anmoto Shiika. You’ve been enlisted as a hazardous target needed to be detained. If you accept our trammel willingly, immediately put your hands on your head and kneel down. If you show any signs of resistance or fleeing, we are entitled to inflict damages to you.”

“W-What are you people?! What are you planning on doing to Shiika?! The police ---“

The long coat wearing figure ignored Kazuha’s shouting, and walked closer towards Shiika.

“The police will not come. We’re the ones that are responsible for capturing harmful subjects like you. I repeat, immediately put your hands on your head and kneel down, Anmoto Shiika.”

“.....!.....!.....”

Shiika, who finally managed to stop her legs from trembling to barely maintaining a standing position, couldn’t understand what was happening or could she have any spare mind to think what these people in front were.

On seeing Shiika standing in place not moving, the goggles wearing figure that was standing on the roof shouted:

“Immediately seize her!”

In the next instant, an unbelievable scene unfolded right in front of Shiika.

Next to those goggles wearing figures, abnormal creatures appeared one after another. Their size

ranged between the sizes of a basketball to the size of a car; all of them had an insect's appearance and features.

With Shiika's parents and sister's gasps as signals, the goggles wearing figures initiated their attacks on Shiika simultaneously.

"...Noo..."

There was no more strength left in her legs; she couldn't even run away anymore.

But in the next instant, the pure white firefly flew in between Shiika and the goggles wearing figures as if it wanted to protect her.

The firefly's body then emitted an overwhelming glow.

".....!"

Above the shocked goggles wearing figures' head ---

Up in the sky that was illuminated by the firefly's aura, pure white snowflakes began to rain down slowly.

Not just one, but more began to appear one after another, its number gradually multiplying.

"[--- Don't...]"

In the quiet surroundings, a calm voice suddenly rang.

"[Don't come...]"

"..."

Shiika involuntarily covered her mouth.

The voice that echoed, was none other than her voice. But strangely, Shiika didn't say a word.

The snowflakes which appeared in the sky, fell towards to the ground.

"[Don't come... near me...]"

The one, who said that line, was Shiika's (Mushi) --- The pure white firefly.

In the next instant, (Mushi)'s dying screams rang loudly against Shiika's eardrums.

Those (Mushi) that came in touch with the falling snow, their bodies were crushed apart as if they were gripped by an invisible hand, or exploded from within; there were even some that got cut into pieces. And not just (Mushi), the ground and buildings that the snow fell on began to collapse as if an earthquake had occurred.

The blizzard of destruction destroyed and swallowed everything in her sight ---

“Uahhhhh!”

“Wahhhh!”

The snow seemed to be deliberately avoiding the humans. However, the figures that had their (Mushi) killed still showed painful expressions as they fell one after another.

“Ah--- Ah---“

In front of the dumbfounded Shiika, a unilateral massacre began to unfold.

Although there were some (Mushi) trying desperately to resist, once their body came in contact with even one snowflake, their bodies would immediately get flattened, crumbled, and crushed. Even those that tried to escape would share the same fate, and get mercilessly engulfed by the falling snows. Wiring poles and walls, which were dragged into this whirlpool of destruction, were turning into powder.

The corpse of (Mushi) that had fallen onto the debris began to slowly dissolve into the space, and disappeared.

At the same time, those goggles wearing figures all dropped to their knees and fell to their sides.

“Uuu---“

On seeing the goggles figures' posture, Shiika could feel a cold chill running down her spine.

Those that had intended to attack Shiika from before, all of them were showing emotionless expressions. And those who had their goggles dropped, they were all half-opening their eyes, staring into the space with their lusterless eyes.

It was as if they were all dead.

Those Mushitsuki who had their (Mushi) killed, would have their soul deprived, losing every emotion and memory they had and became “Fallen” ---

Recalling the rumor, Shiika's trembling legs began to step backward.

"No ---"

In Shiika's eyes, those people who had lost their emotions and couldn't even move or speak, were much more terrifying and frightening than (Mushi).

"[Just...Destroy...Everything.]"

The white-colored firefly continued with Shiika's voice.

"No --- I didn't do it, I didn't ---."

Shiika gradually turned to face her family.

"Mon-Monster---."

".....!"

The mutter that her mother whispered, instantly carved a deep wound on Shiika's already broken heart.

Even her sister that always stood on her side, was now gazing at her with a fearful look.

"---|---"

Her steps became lighter.

Because of all the things that had happened, her mind's comprehension ability was unable to keep up. It felt so painful as if she was about to pass out any second.

Mushitsuki --- The human host that was infested by the dream-devouring (Mushi).

As a result of becoming such an existence, not just others, but even her family had begun to be afraid of her.

Shiika dragged her shaking legs before turning her back facing her family. She had already lost the stamina to run.

"--- W-Wait, Shiika!"

From behind came her sister's calling, but Shiika now was unable to hear it.

Shifting her blurring gaze to the sky, she could see more black long coat wearing figures descending from the sky holding onto their (Mushi)'s legs. However, the instant when those (Mushi) came in contact with the falling snow, they were torn and crumbled into balls like a paper toy until ultimately becoming flattened. Those figures, who were hiding their identities behind the goggles, dropped onto the ground, and stopped moving.

"I--- I'm---"

The white snowflakes continued to fall endlessly, completely destroying and engulfing everything in Shiika's sight.

"--- I'm --- I'm a... monster..."

Shiika's murmur, was completely erased by the overwhelming sound of destruction from her surroundings.

2.01

Kakkou Part 2

(Kakkou) was lurking in the shadows under the elevated road's handrails.

On the other side of the narrow lane, people on their way home could be seen crossing back and forth. The business district located in the downtown area of Ouka city was right in front of him.

At his feet was a puddle which had his own shadow reflected on it. It showed just how much his figured had completely changed to which in primary school.

Equipment such as the thick coat, gloves, and thigh boots were covering his whole body. All of the equipment was made of special materials, which could withstand fierce impact. The big goggles which hid half of his face, pushed his hair up and made him look like a devil.

This equipment was unified in its black color, which was standard for equipment used by the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau East Central Division. And all equipment was manufactured in consideration of fighting with Mushitsuki, especially the goggles, which could be said to be the crystallization of the newest technology.

Suddenly, with a loud hum, a red spot appeared in (Kakkou)'s goggles.

In his view, there was a map, showing the escape route of the formidable Mushitsuki called (Fuyuhotaru).

Right now, (Fuyuhotaru) seemed to wander near the residential district. Her walking path neither showed any purpose nor a sense of unity, whether she would come to (Kakkou)'s location or not was still a doubt.

According to the operation, the unified squad, which consisted of elites from each branch, would soon be in contact with (Fuyuhotaru). The force which (Kakkou) was in, which consisted only of the East Central branch under the jurisdiction of Ouka city; was actually in place far away from the battleground in the name of supporting the rear. If things went smoothly they would be able to capture (Fuyuhotaru) and bring her into their branch— the higher-ups probably thought of such self-interested issues when they devised the operation.

"I guess that means we newbies have no chance of appearing on the stage?"

It wasn't until then did (Kakkou) become aware of the fact that he was a little bit nervous, so he immediately relaxed his shoulders.

In addition to (Kakkou), at least several dozen other combatants could also be sensed lurking in the range of a hundred-meter radius. In the shadow of the building, the figures of combatants wearing the same equipment as (Kakkou) could also be occasionally seen.

"Well, of course, being comfortable and doing nothing is best."

After hearing Haji's words which seemed to have a hidden meaning, he considered that things might be worse, but the unified squad led by (Namie) was the force setting the main fighting force of SEPB. So, (Kakkou)'s first mission might end smoothly.

"Let's just drop it, slack off and go back...."

Just as he warmed up to the idea, a voice boomed out from the wireless communicator of his goggles.

"Attention to all of the East Central Division's combatants awaiting in standby."

It was an unfamiliar voice; it was probably the director of East Central Division, Takakuwa Azuma.

As a matter of fact, He did say he would personally command the force.

(Kakkou) recalled Haji's words.

However, at the moment, the standby team had absolutely nothing to do at all — he was probably planning to use this chance and show off his power and prestige as a leader right?

But just then, Takakuwa Azuma abruptly issued an unexpected command.

"From this moment onward, the objective of the operation will be changed, the East Central Division is ordered to execute a top-priority mission."

(Kakkou) frowned spontaneously.

"Change..... the objective of the operation?"

"Before executing the operation, I hope that you combatants have already grasped the current situation. As mentioned before, the "Ishu" found about two hours before, (Fuyuhotaru), is still on the run. Sooner or later, forces consisting of each division including the Central Headquarters, make contact with her, and then defeat her. However, it should be a tough battle, which will weaken the fighting strength of SEPB and make it fall into a temporary confusion. As a result, the force protecting the Central Headquarters should be weakened right now. "

What the hell is this guy talking about?

The first half of what Takakuwa Azuma had said, (Kakkou) could follow quickly, but the second half seemed to have not the slightest connection with the current situation at all.

Just as he was feeling strange, the map on his goggles' lens was suddenly replaced by another image. It was the map of the Ouka city, which was gradually enlarged, displaying a route connecting several cities.

"What? What does this mean? This has nothing to do with (Fuyuhotaru), right?"

"The campaign that I have been planning for many years; it is finally about time for it to be implemented. All combatants are to be called off standby and immediately take action. I will take the lead, but all combat-related instructions will be given by the level six ranked member, (Hozumi)."

"Yes, sir."

"I "

An unexpected answer suddenly came from behind (Kakkou).

(Kakkou), surprised, turned back only to see a young boy come out of the shadow of narrow lane. Though he had exactly the same equipment as (Kakkou)'s, (Hozumi) was a head taller than him; and judging from his deep voice, he was probably four to five years older than (Kakkou). He also dyed his hair blue and combed them into seven braids.

Since when did this guy get here...?

In the current stage, "Ishu" Mushitsuki were very rare existences. With a title such as a "level sixed ranked", he had the right to become a squad's leader. It's been rumored that he was quite a powerful foe. Even (Kakkou), who was still a trainee until now, had heard of his name.

Following after (Hozumi), combatants began to appear one after another, advancing in his direction.

(Kakkou) immediately felt something was wrong, so he overtook (Hozumi).

"Oi! What the hell is happening? Where are you guys go---?"

"Is today your first day doing a mission?"

(Hozumi), glancing at him, said with strange and deep tone:

"If it's so, it cannot be helped that you don't know... We actually have been waiting for this chance to come for a long time already."

"That's why, I'm asking you what is going on."

"We cannot go on living... like this anymore. We Mushitsuki, have been ordered about indiscriminately according to the Central Headquarters wishes, and are destined to be thrown away like rubbish sooner or later. Only we can save ourselves..."

"Haa? What the hell are you talking about?"

Ignoring confused (Kakkou), (Hozumi) and other combatants began to run on the indicated route which came from the goggles.

At the same time, Takakuwa Azuma's declaration rang in his ears.

"East Central Division will now begin to assault the Central Headquarters, and take it over. All combatants are to immediately leave Ouka City at once with haste!"

"What---"

In front of dumbfounded (Kakkou), all combatants summoned their (Mushi) at the same time.

Dozens of Mushitsuki grabbed onto their respective (Mushi), while some others rode together on the huge (Mushi)'s back and flew straight ahead.

"I repeat, East Central Division will now break away from Ouka City, and take over the headquarters at once!"

Amidst the charging army of Mushitsuki, only one person ---

(Kakkou), was standing still, at a loss.



2.02

The Others

“The East Central Division has already started the operation. All that’s left to do --- is for you (Namie) to fulfill your duties.”

Coming through the goggles’ wireless communicator was her father --- Takakuwa Azuma’s voice.

Minori became silent for an instant. Right now --- only now, she hoped that her father could call her by her real name. However, the fact that such a spoiled thought would never be allowed was something she already knew.

“Copy, the unified squad has already completed merging. The evacuation of nearby citizens has also been completed up to eighty percent. Right now we are situated at the sparsely populated riverside area, and standing by. Judging from the Intel sent by the scouting squad, there are still a few minutes before we make contact with (Fuyuhotaru).”

Minori stood still on the bridge, feeling December’s cold breeze blowing against her.

The East Central Division squad lead by Takakuwa Azuma had already begun advancing towards Headquarters. They had already crossed countless streets within Ouka City, and presumably would be arriving at the Central Headquarters within a few minutes.

East Central Division’s coup would most likely be discovered before then. But by the time the Central Headquarters and other divisions find out, SEPB’s main forces would already be engaging (Fuyuhotaru) together with Minori. If so, they would not be able to send reinforcements to Headquarters even if they wanted to.

“.....”

Minori felt her chest being restless.

What she and her father were doing right now was no doubt the right thing to do. This country had indulged those corrupted higher ups, letting them do things as they wished for far too long, and now was waning because of it. In regards to this matter the Takakuwa family, who had a much deeper connection than anyone else, had already become well aware of it.

This country must correct the direction of its development, and for that to happen, someone must stand out and execute justice.

Minori surveyed her surroundings.

On the bridge, riverside, and above her, were more than two hundred Mushitsuki in total. Among them, Minori was the only that wore a pitch black long coat. Around her stood countless combatants of the

Central Headquarters clad in white coats. Other combatants included those that wore the outerwear jacket of the North Central Division, the gray overalls of the West Central Division, and the red-colored equipment of the South Central Division. The combatants who came from the other Divisions had all gathered together as one.

"All combatants prepare for battle! Get in the condition to summon your (Mushi) in an instant, and standby! Before I give out any commands, refrain from doing anything conspicuous!"

Coming from behind the shouting Minori, came the sound of a whisper that was deliberately made audible.

"Tsk, that East Central's brat that gained her place by relying on her parents' reputation, acting so high and mighty..."

Even though there was an impulse of wanting to immediately turn around and refute, she somehow managed to endure it.

It was mainly because she had already gotten used to people gossiping behind her back. And not just during her missions, even in her currently enrolled high school; there were people who spread rumors behind her back due to her strong self-esteem and boyish tone.

But, no matter what time, Minori had always held her head up high and lived upright.

No matter what, Minori had always believed in her dream. To her, whom was born as a member of the Takakuwa family, the guardian of this country, it was natural that she would inherit her respected father's career.

To protect this country ---

That was Minori's dream, as well as her duty.

As long as she has this dream living within her, Minori felt like she would not lose to anyone. No matter what happens, she would be able to live holding her head up high and with a straightened back, just like her father Takakuwa Azuma.

"Target has appeared! It's (Fuyuhotaru)!"

The combatants situated on the other side of the river shouted that line.

Minori narrowed her eyes to take a closer look, but immediately noticed something was wrong.

Her vision began to distort— or so she initially thought; but that wasn't actually the case.

Rather it was the existence over there that caused everything to distort.

The road was upheaved, trees were blown down, and even the parked cars on the side were flattened.

Shrouded in the storm of falling white snow, a tiny figure slowly walked out of the space of endless destruction and entered Minori's vision.

"...A kid...?..."

The combatants began to riot all of a sudden. Although the abnormal scene in front of them was surprising enough, the most surprising thing to them, was the fact that (Fuyuhotaru)'s real identity was actually just an elementary school girl.

Minori could not hide the confusion within her from surfacing on her face as well.

The girl that was slowly walking towards her, her lovely face had already been dirtied by soil and mud. The figure of her trudging her steps emotionlessly seemed so weak and fragile, as if she was about to fall at any second.

"She is...(Fuyuhotaru)...? --- This country's --- enemy...?"

Of course, it was not her first time seeing a child Mushitsuki. But the squad that Minori was leading right now was a squad that consisted of more than hundreds of combatants. Could it be that right now, she had to issue them an order to capture such young girl?

To the Minori that had such high self-righteousness, it was something that she would never consider.

"In contact with the enemy!"

The girl, who came to the end of the bridge, noticed their presence.

Standing in the center of the devouring snow, the girl gradually lifted her head.

".....!"

The girl --- was crying.

In Minori's mind, flashed the figure of her past self. It happened when her father brought her to a zoo for the first and last time, and she unknowingly got lost. Because she had been separated from her father, her unease caused her to sob and cry. At that time, Minori had been crying for help, hoping that someone could give her a helping hand.

The girl before Minori, was exactly the same as her back then.

Capture... do I really have to do that to her? To such a young kid...?! To a kid that's looking for help?!

Her clenching fists subconsciously began to tremble.

"(Namie), what's your order!?"

Behind her came the shout of the combatants.

At the same time, her respected father's voice also came through the goggles.

"(Namie), have you made contact with (Fuyuhotaru) yet? Our movement will soon be noticed by Headquarters; you must enter battle as soon as possible."

Minori clenched her lips, and raised her hand as if she was waving away her confusion.

Don't hesitate! This is for the sake of protecting this country! This is... justice!!!

She raised her head, and gave her order:

"Identified capture target, (Fuyuhotaru)! All combatants, attack!"

3.00

Shiika Part 4

In a space shrouded by silence, Shiika could be seen standing all alone.

The scenery that entered her vision had absolutely no mercy at all, everything was deformed and had lost their original shapes.

The battle that broke out abruptly quickly became unilateral massacre in a blink of eyes --- before ending unilaterally.

“.....”

“Hu...”

The Shiika, who took a deep breath, was gazing absently at the view ahead of her.

In front of her, was a vast wasteland enveloped in silence. The river basin that was here not so long ago, had already been flattened out, leaving nothing but dirt and rock behind. Even the bridge mounted near the river was also completely destroyed without leaving a trace. The whole process of destruction, Shiika didn't avert her eyes, and witnessed until the very last second.

The instant when hundreds of (Mushi) came in contact with the white firefly's raining snow, they all gave off dying screams before being slaughtered almost instantly. And every time when a (Mushi) got killed, someone behind them would suddenly collapse. However, before their bodies hit the ground, they would stare straight at Shiika with their lusterless pupils,

--- Stop it already...

Just how many times has she said this line over and over already?

Towards the Mushitsuki that were leaping at her, and the white firefly that was infested in her...

She had shouted this line many times from the bottom of her heart.

But even so, the goggles-wearing Mushitsuki continued to challenge the white firefly like moths being drawn by the flame, before falling one after another.

The white firefly's aura became brighter and brighter. Every time when it snowed, she would feel something precious within her being forcefully taken away. Amidst the massacre, the image of her family and classmates had flashed through countless times, before disappearing without a trace.

Even her most beloved sister's smile, she couldn't even remember it anymore.

The snow raining down by the firefly slowly formed a blizzard with Shiika in its center. However, only in the range of her reach would the pure white snowflakes deliberately avoid, and fall elsewhere.

“Just... what in the world... are you...? How did ... we?!...”

Just then --- the sound of rubble being pushed away suddenly rang.

Tears had already run dry; her voice had also become hoarse. Lifting her face that had traces of tears left behind, Shiika turned to the direction of where the voice was heard coming from.

In the middle of the silent destruction that was still ongoing, a teenage girl wrapped in a black long coat stood up. The goggles covering her face were already broken, barely hanging by her neck. Her strong-willed look, which also giving off a sense of fragility mixture within, could be seen.

The teenage girl made her fragile steps, walking towards Shiika.

“...What’s...wrong with me...?!---”

Above the teenage girl that seemed close to tears, a white-winged butterfly appeared flapping its wings. Emitting a dim glow from its body, the butterfly’s contour suddenly began to distort.

Perhaps it was damaged from the snowflake from before? One side of its wings was almost destroyed. However, in the next instant, the butterfly became abnormally huge as if it had swollen up; its pairs of wings instantly turned into pure white flames.

Shiika’s hair fluttered slightly as a burning heat wave blew against her cold cheeks. The Namie butterfly enveloped in ultra-high temperature flame beat its wings, and instantly evaporated the surrounding rubble and ground.

But then, before it could go any further, the firefly floating in front Shiika’s chest emitted a white brilliance. The pure white snowflakes falling from the sky came in contact with the Namie butterfly that was surrounded by white flames.

“Uug...Ahhhhh!”

As if an explosion had exploded, Shiika vision was immediately screened by a large amount of steam. The flames enveloping the Namie butterfly were extinguished into pieces, before eventually being blown away and disappearing.

“Hah...Hahh---”

The Namie butterfly that had lost its flame, and both wings, fell onto the ground. Even though it barely escaped the fate of it being completely killed, it would no longer be able to fly anymore. It was struggling on the ground like a worm.

“---I...”

The teenage girl fell to the ground on one knee as she stared at Shiika.

“...No matter what... I... have to protect this country...! I won't... lose... like this--!”

The Namie butterfly that was desperately struggling on the ground lifted its head once again. As if it was squeezing out the last ounce of its strength, flame enveloped its entire body, before slowly forming two pairs of wings.

“I --- will protect this country!”

As if it was replying back to the teenage girl's roar, the flame enveloping the Namie butterfly exploded. Fierce heat waves stormed her surrounding, causing rubbles to dissolve almost instantly. The giant butterfly burning in white flames, once again took flight into the air.

Shiika could only gaze blankly at the teenage girl in front of her. The fists that were clenched up unknowingly, had already become numb.

Just then, through the goggles of the teenage girl showing obvious hostility, some noise came. The cracked up voice coming from the goggles seemed to be a man's voice.

The teenage girl's movement suddenly stopped, her expression was changed as she looked down at the goggles hanging by her neck.

“Huh... Haji...Keigo...?”

Although the content of the dialogue couldn't be heard, it seemed like that man was telling the teenage girl something.

“Stop joking around...! How can we retreat right now...?...Huh, (Kakkou)? There's no way a guy like him that was never heard of could win against such a monster ---!”

On hearing the word “monster”, Shiika's shoulder suddenly trembled slightly.

“.....!”

--- Pa

All of sudden, the flame wrapping around the Namie butterfly began to waver. The wings, which were spewing out heat waves, were starting to flicker as if it was running out of fuel.

“--- What... did you just... say?”

The teenage girl that was hysterically shouting not so long ago suddenly widened her eyes.

“There's no way... my father... would do such a thing... Letting other countries ---“

Soon, it seemed like she could no longer suppress her emotions anymore, and started shouting:

“Stop lying! Father has always been protecting this country! The Takakuwa Family has always been protecting this country! What we are doing... is justice!”

But soon, she became speechless as she turned to Shiika’s direction.

“N-No... that girl... is this country’s enemy... That’s why... No, no, no! I-I...! Father he...! Stop! Stop talking--!”

The teenage girl that was constantly shaking her head while covering her ears, suddenly froze stiff still upon hearing the man’s next line.

Pa ---

Pa ---

The flame enveloping the Namie Butterfly gradually died down, before eventually --- completely disappeared.

Only that man’s last line, reached Shiika’s ears.

--- “You’re nothing but a decoy.”

The man uttered that line with a very frivolous tone.

And then, as if she had used up all her energy, both of her knees dropped weakly to the ground.

“.....”

Her pupils that were staring at the void slowly began to lose their lusters, just like all other people that were turned into Fallen by Shiika.

Shiika walked closer to the teenage girl, and reached her hand onto her cheeks that were covered with tears.

“I’m...sorry...”

Teenage girl’s emptiness eyes, stared up to Shiika.

“I’m sorry... I tried to stop it... again and again, telling it to stop... but it just won’t listen to me... I didn’t know what to do...”

Her voice didn’t seem to have become completely hoarse yet, tears also seemed to not have run dry. The Shiika, who was whispering with a soft and weak voice that was barely audible, was also crying along with the teenage girl. The tears that gushed out from somewhere blurred her vision.

Why things had to turn out like this, she didn’t know. What she needs to do in order for it to stop, she didn’t know that as well. Because there was nothing that she could do, that’s why she could only cry. The injured teenage girl gazed straight at Shiika with a surprised look.



Facing the Shiika who was caressing her cheeks, she gently overlapped her hand onto hers while showing a weak smile.

“The one saying sorry... should be me... To think that ---“

Gradually, the teenage girl’s warmth flowed from her hands onto Shiika’s.

“To think that... it was this easy to touch you...”

As if she couldn’t endure a certain emotion, the teenage girl lowered her head.

“...I’m really sorry... I originally... was hoping to help you...”

Squeezing out a weak voice that felt as if compressed by a mixture of emotions, the girl raised her head once again.

“Could you tell me your dream? What is it that you’re hoping for?”

Upon being asked, Shiika suddenly recalled.

Even though there were a lot of things that she couldn’t remember anymore, only this, she could still clearly remember.

Even if she were to get always reprimanded by her family, it was fine.

Even if she were to have no friends at school, it was fine.

But, there must be somewhere... somewhere out there that ---

“I hope... I can find a place where I can belong, a place that allows me to stay...”

Shiika replied clearly.

The teenage girl narrowed her eyes as if she seeing something bright, before changing her serious expression into that of a normal teenage girl that could be seen anywhere.

“...It’s a nice dream.”

“What’s your dream, Onee-san?”

Upon being asked by Shiika, the teenage girl laughed self-deprecatingly:

“I wanted to protect this country... but, that---“

“It’s a splendid dream.”

On hearing Shiika’s words, the teenage raised her head as if she was startled.

“...Eh?”

"I think, that's a very splendid dream."

The teenage girl listened to Shiika's word with a dazed expression. But soon, her expression slowly distorted. She pressed her hand against her head, and began to tremble her shoulders from laughter as if she recalled something.

"Aha...Ahaha..."

"Mm?"

"Yeah... it is just as you said, that was exactly what I thought when I was young too. Every time when I saw my amazing father, I couldn't stop hoping that I can grow up to just be like him, hoping that I can overcome the great task of protecting this country. Unknowingly... it has also become my dream... Ahaha..."

She originally thought the teenage girl was laughing, but she was in fact crying. Teardrops which were even bigger than before rolled down her cheeks.

"Aha...Just when did I go wrong...I should've known long ago... True justice, is not defeating the enemies... or making comrades submit under me... but rather protecting those that were seeking for help... like you."

The teenage girl reached forward her hand, and stroked Shiika's head gently. Although it felt really weak as if she didn't use any strength at all, it was filled with warmth. Even though Shiika couldn't remember her expression anymore, the teenage girl's hands felt exactly the same as her sister's warm hands.

"Could you... tell me your name?"

"Anmoto...Shiika."

Putting the hand that was stroking her head onto her shoulder, the teenage girl lightly pushed Shiika forward.

"Go on, Shiika."

Gazing straight at her eyes, the teenage girl continued:

"No matter who is it that comes your way, or wants to stop you, you should never give up your dream. Your dream, is something that should not get obstructed by anyone... A dream, that no one should be able to stop you from realizing; a dream that belongs only to you."

The teenage girl's voice became weaker and weaker.

"..."

It felt really strange.

Even though the opposite party was injured because of her, it seemed like she had forgiven her already.

After the encounter of the sunglasses-wearing woman, and becoming a Mushitsuki, she thought that it was only natural for everyone to be afraid of her.

No, it was also the same before that happened. Aside from her sister, there was no one else willing to acknowledge her existence.

Even though it was supposed to be that way --- the teenage girl in front had also acknowledged Shiika. She allowed Shiika's existence, and even told her to protect her dream.

"...Mm."

She didn't know what would happen to her down the road.

The only thing she knew was the fact that she had become a Mushitsuki, and she barely had any dream left within her.

But Shiika, finally made a decision.

No matter what happens, she would never give up her dream ---

"Thank you, Onee-san."

The teenage girl replied with a smile.

"I should be the one thanking you... If we can meet again... then next time... I will definitely uphold the justice... of protecting you....."

The teenage girl's body suddenly tilted, and fell to her side. Accompanying the teenage girl, the injured Namie butterfly fell onto the ground, landing next to her. It seemed like she only lost her consciousness, rather than becoming a Fallen.

"....."

After gazing at the teenage girl, who she didn't know the name of, for quite a while, Shiika turned around and left.

With the white firefly floating next to her, Shiika made her step forward onto the barren basin.

3.01

Kakkou Part 4

“Ugh...!”

In the nick of time, (Kakkou) narrowly dodged the sharp claw that came from the ground below, piercing through his long coat.

In front of him who immediately pulled back, a teenage boy who had his blue hair tied into braids appeared.

“Why are you getting in our way? The branch director is actually helping us, you know?”

It was (Hozumi). The teenage boy was standing on top of the carapace floating on the concrete ground was surrounded by long legs several meters in size; those crustacean-like legs all had sharp claws on their ends.

“...Haa? How is he helping us?”

(Kakkou) scoffed as he leapt to the side and made an over-head jump using the wire pole, attempting to bypass the enemy in front to catch up to the Mercedes-Benz.

However, (Hozumi) did not let him go. He immediately caught up to (Kakkou) by using his (Mushi) like a surfboard --- It seemed like (Hozumi)’s (Mushi) was capable of moving freely amidst the ground.

“Even for someone like us who are being used as tools until we’re eventually broken and thrown away, there is still something that we can do! In order to change this country, there should be something that only we Mushitsuki can do!”

Accompanied by the teenage boy’s shout, many long legs appeared right next to (Kakkou)’s legs. Due to him not being able to predict where these surprise attacks would come from, his shoulder and back were immediately marked with several scratches and scars.

“Damn.....!”

Despite losing his balance, (Kakkou) still raised his pistol and took aim.

However, just before he could fire, (Hozumi) sank into the ground along with his (Mushi). Behind (Kakkou), who had lost his target and was surveying his surroundings, unseen claws continued to descend onto his body, grazing by his abdomen.

“Uaghh!”

“Aren’t you a Mushitsuki as well?! If so, is there a reason for us to be fighting each other like this then? Why won’t you just come with us?!”

“...!”

It seemed like he couldn't just ignore the Ishu level six-ranked Mushitsuki in front of him and chase after the Mercedes-Benz as he wish. Standing in the middle of the opposite direction lane, (Kakkou) frowned -- the battles till now had caused a lot of damage to the surrounding area, numerous cars could be seen abandoned far away. Even the crying screams of the pedestrians, which he was already tired of hearing, could still be heard rising up and down faraway.

Causing such uproar, even SEPB's highly capable intelligence management ability probably wouldn't be of much use at this state right? The events happening today would undoubtedly become the root of a bigger crisis; it might even affect the future development of this country.

“From now on, we Mushitsuki will change the world. We will take revenge against those guys who treated us like monsters!”

(Kakkou) clutched his bleeding wound as he panted heavily.

Due to the fact that he had been fighting till now, his body was already worn-out. In addition, his dream had also been devoured nonstop from overusing the (Mushi)'s ability, causing his mentality to reach its limit as well. He felt like his head was going blank, and couldn't even think straight anymore.

Why did I still choose to fight even after suffering this much ---?

This thought suddenly came across his mind.

Getting hurt from all the fighting, having his dream devoured by his (Mushi) as the cost, and turning his former Mushitsuki comrades into Fallens --- depriving them of their dreams, yet still fighting even now.

What was it for...?

“---Idiot...”

“Huh?”

On hearing (Kakkou)'s murmur, (Hozumi) could not help but questioned that line.

“Aren't you idiots? All of you...”

“What did you say?--!”

(Kakkou) raised his head, and laughed while panting.

“Us, change the world? Take revenge against those who treated us like monsters?... Did Takakuwa tell you all that?”

“What's so funny about it? The branch director told us, we have the power to. And he also said that this power is something that everyone desires. That's why, we ---”

“Ahaha. Just like an idiot...”

Facing the (Kakkou) who laughed, (Hozumi) immediately changed his expression. Eight sharp claws instantly surrounded (Kakkou), hanging above him as if they would launch an attack any second.

“We are monsters.”

(Kakkou) suddenly said that with a smile.

This caused the blue haired teenage boy to become speechless. The eight claws suddenly stopped moving at the same time.

“Having this kind of power, how can we not be monsters? Even if we change the world like you said, it still can’t change the fact that we are monsters. Not only that, it would further ---“

“What are you trying to say--?”

“Even Takakuwa, was probably thinking as such. You guys have been deceived all along, and eventually will end up being thrown away after being used thoroughly. Ahaha, what an idiot.”

“If so, why are you fighting so desperately against us then?! If I remember correctly...you’re (Kakkou) right? I heard you were the branch director assistant’s best pupil --- According to what you said, what’s the difference between Haji Keigo and Takakuwa branch director then?! Aren’t they both using us Mushitsuki nonetheless?!”

“Yeah, that’s true. Haji is just the same, treating us like monsters... and lies all day...”

He thought so from the bottom of his heart.

So why did he not choose Takakuwa, but rather Haji Keigo?

And the reason for that was just a trivial matter.

“But...at least that guy, is not afraid of me...”

There was no way that he would be able to establish a relationship of mutual trust between him and Haji Keigo, he knew that very well. He couldn’t make out what the man was thinking half of the time, and he only thought of him as some disgusting guy who likes to lie and makes jokes that weren’t funny from time to time.

But Haji Keigo said that he would give (Kakkou) a place of belonging.

If even that line was a lie, he intended on killing him with his bare hands.

And even after knowing he would do such thing, Haji Keigo was not afraid of him.

Using each other, and thrown away when the other party no longer has any value --- a relationship as simple as that.

“How boring. Just because of that reason, you’re here desperately fighting against us?”

(Hozumi) suddenly spurned that line, before entering his combat stance.

“If you want the reason as to why I’m still fighting, I still have one...”

(Kakkou) continued his stance of holding the pistol in his hand by his side, and raised his head to gaze at the claws which surrounded him one by one.

“Even though I’m a Mushitsuki, a monster ---”

At that instant, seven claws came straight down at him simultaneously. (Hozumi)’s (Mushi)’s leg were slashing at him from all directions.

(Kakkou) then murmured with a low voice:

“Even so... I still want to realize my dream.”

Through directing the attacks to his side, (Kakkou) narrowly dodged all the critical hits. His feet, neck, shoulder, and abdomen that were grazed by the claws all oozed out fresh blood.

But at that instant, (Kakkou) seized the chance and clung onto one of the legs as hard as he could, causing it to give off a cracking sound.

“Ugh---”

(Hozumi) gave off a painful moan before suddenly disappearing.

However, immediately after---

“---Ahhhh!!”

The blue hair teenage boy’s crying scream could be heard coming from below.

Using all the strength he had left within, (Kakkou) forcefully pulled the enemy’s (Mushi) out from the ground. An insect with a whale-like body then emerged from the concrete floor along with (Hozumi) riding on its back. It crashed into the surrounding wire poles, billboards, and traffic lights as its body being tossed into the high sky.

Its gigantic shadow descended parallel next to a high-rise building. (Kakkou) raised his pistol into the air, and took aim at the shadow’s center. On the lens of the goggles he was wearing, a red dot flashed for an instant.

“W-Wait a minute! We’re all Mushitsuki aren’t we---!”

In front of the gunpoint where burning flame could be seen spewing out, (Hozumi) shouted out loud.

(Kakkou) input more strength onto the finger that was pressing the trigger --- Inside the mouth of the (Mushi) that had fused with the pistol, an overwhelming destructive bullet that was gyrating at high-speed could be seen, as a result he could feel his dream being rapidly gnawed away. His head became hazy for a moment as past memories flashed through before instantly disappearing.

“You can hate me.”

The moment he pulled the trigger, the muzzle that had become the monster’s mandible spewed out flames of hell.

Gunfire turned into shockwaves and shattered all the surrounding building’s windows; nearby cars were upheaved, and the ground (Kakkou) was standing on concaved instantly with cracks from the recoil.

The gigantic body that was falling down from the sky, couldn’t even give its last scream before death. A huge circular hole could be seen blasted through the body that was wrapped in hard carapace. Its eight legs were also shattered into all directions. Before landing onto the ground, its corpse disappeared as if it had melted completely into space.

-- Pa!

(Hozumi) dropped to the ground. His goggles had already fallen off, his pairs of emotionless pupils were gazing straight at (Kakkou), who was holding the pistol.

“...Damn it.”

He swore as he readjusted his goggles.

Gripping tightly onto the pistol in his hand, (Kakkou) turned around and left.

While hearing the screams of pedestrians from seeing the battle between monsters coming from a distance away, (Kakkou) began to catch up to the Mercedes-Benz on the road.

Around the border of Ouka City, he finally found the car he was looking for guarded by numerous Mushitsuki.

Upon noticing (Kakkou) who was closing in on them, the combatants began to engage.

But none were his opponent; he defeated the combatants one by one.

And as if it was waiting for that last person to be defeated, another car overtook him from behind.

It was a black-colored luxury car. It instantly overtook the Mercedes-Benz up ahead and interspersed into its lane before doing an emergency brake and blocked its path.

Sandwiched in between the black-colored car and (Kakkou), the Mercedes-Benz could only immediately brake. The door of the Mercedes-Benz that was stopped in the middle of the road was then opened, a middle-aged man walked out from within.

On seeing that man's sharp looks, (Kakkou) could not help but remember the figure of a demon god statue that he once saw in the textbook. It seemed like that man had not slightest wavering in regards to the current situation, and continued to emit an overwhelming domineering atmosphere that felt as if it would engulf everything around him.

"Who are you?"

Takakuwa Azuma stared straight at (Kakkou) with a stern look.

Looking straight back at the man's evil spirit-like gaze, (Kakkou) replied softly:

"(Kakkou)."

Just then, the sound of another car door being opened came. The young man who blocked his car in front of the Mercedes-Benz showed up.

It was Haji Keigo.

"It should be fine here, (Kakkou), good work --- was what I wanted to say, but it seemed like there's still one last task remained for you."

Haji took a look at Takakuwa Azuma, and continued with his usual relaxed tone.

"Go and capture (Fuyuhotaru), (Kakkou)."

"....."

Yet (Kakkou) didn't move.

"What's wrong, (Kakkou)? That's an order, if you don't hurry everything will be too late."

"...I quit."

"Huh?"

(Kakkou) turned his face away from Haji who narrowed his eyes. The sensation of depriving countless Mushitsukis' dream could still be felt remaining on the hand holding the pistol.

He had done something that he shouldn't do.

"I can't do it anymore..."

Before coming here, he had run a pretty long distance, been injured quite severely, and had also deprived many --- many Mushitsukis' dreams. Even though during the battle he kept on convincing himself, when he faces Haji Keigo again, he just could not stop that confusion from surfacing again.

The things that he had done, are they something that could be tolerated?

The young man standing in front of him, is he trustworthy enough to be followed??

And lastly --- before he could realize his dream, would he be able to endure this kind of guilt breaking him apart?

“I’m already tired of all these...”

For a mere twelve-year-old kid like him, the position of a SEPB combatant was just too heavy for him. Being as powerful as he was didn’t mean that he also had a strong-willed heart to shoulder all the responsibilities.

Seeing (Kakkou) biting his lips and lowering his head, Haji Keigo shrugged his shoulders.

“The unified squad was wiped out completely.”

He continued in his usual relaxed attitude.

“From this moment onward, SEPB has temporarily classified (Fuyuhotaru) as an Ishu level one ranked. And the only one left capable of capturing the target would be you, whom I personally trained. The target’s location should be sent to your goggles really soon---“

“Didn’t I tell you that I quit?!”

(Kakkou) finally could not endure it anymore, and started shouting. He tugged the young man’s suit with his hands that were glowing with a green patterned aura.

“Why do I have to deprive other’s dreams?! Why do I have to do such a thing in order to survive! To you...to you normal people, is there a difference between me and (Fuyuhotaru)?! It’s just a matter of one less monster or not, isn’t it?!”

Haji did not resist, he let (Kakkou) shake his body as he wished while smiling back with his usual smile.

“If so --- you’re thinking about not doing anything, and waiting until the moment when your (Mushi) devours your dream completely?”

“---“

(Kakkou) widened his eyes.

“Do you think you can live on, without hurting yourself or anyone else? What an arrogant thought you have there. We are not God. No matter where we go, what goal we have, we have to hurt others in order to live on.”

(Kakkou) let go of the hands clutching onto Haji’s suit, yet he still bit his lips firmly.

“Do you wish to die without doing anything, not even trying to realize your dream? Or would you rather-- hurt others to get what you wanted? What we have is the decision to make such a choice, that’s all.”

Haji tidied his shirt, before turning around facing (Kakkou) with his back. He ignored (Kakkou) who was now standing there dazedly and walked toward Takakuwa Azuma.

“---(Fuyuhotaru) is currently in a berserk state. Her dream will probably be devoured completely sooner or later. She will eventually die, and take out everything else along with her.”

“.....”

“Remember, (Kakkou). (Fuyuhotaru) is just the same. The instant when we decided what we want, we will no longer have any place to escape to. The only thing we can choose is our way of life.”

(Kakkou) could clearly hear the sound of himself grinding his teeth.

Being a Mushitsuki as he was, if he were to defy the SEPB, he would undoubtedly be labeled as a wanted rebel. If so, he would eventually end up like the fleeing (Fuyuhotaru), and get killed one way or another.

No – according to what Haji Keigo said. Even if he were not a Mushitsuki, the result would still be the same. To obtain something, one would eventually have to undergo the fate of hurting others, or getting hurt by others.

“Besides, if you die... You’ll lose your chance to make your choice.”

(Kakkou) remained silent, before slowly turning around, and made a heavy step forward.

“Don’t lose, (Kakkou).”

Did he mean to not lose to (Fuyuhotaru)? Or did he mean something else? Perhaps it was because of him being at a young age, he was unable to understand the meaning hidden in that line spoken with such a calm tone.

Up in the sky where the two had silently parted ways, white snow began to descend slowly.

The Others

After seeing (Kakkou) off, Haji shifted his gaze back to the devil in front of him.

“Thank you very much for listening quietly on the side, Branch Director Takakuwa.”

“--- Do you know the reason why I appointed you, a rookie that was just recently recruited, as my assistant?”

Takakuwa Azuma, who had been silent till now, finally spoke with his low, elderly voice. Not just his looks and his aura, even the voice emitted from his throat, was filled with overwhelming presence.

“It was indeed an unconventional promotion, as if lightning had struck from the sky. I’m sure many around me were full of envy.”

“It was because I know you’re the same as me, despite our methods being different. Even though I don’t know what you’re trying to pull behind me, I really liked those cunning tactics of yours --- Is this how you’re going to repay me, Haji Keigo?”

“We both are careerists. Even after knowing this kind of situation would happen, you still recruited me as your companion; I have to say, you’re really broad-minded, but speaking of disappointment – it is the same for me as well, Branch Director.”

Silence began to shroud their environment. Although it was a bit late, Haji had already issued the martial law towards the local government agencies through the SPEB. In the radius of several hundred meters, no one should be allowed to pass through.

“What you’re planning --- will end in failure.”

Even after hearing Haji’s words, Takakuwa’s expression did not change the slightest.

“Depriving the control of the SEPBB, and taking in all the Mushitsuki that were registered as members, using them to stage a coup, and change this country --- That is what you said to deceive the members of the East Central Division right?”

“.....”

“But your real goal, is not that, am I right?”

The man, who was never shaken, twitched his brow for the first time ever.

As if he was trying to stop Haji from continuing, his glare became even sharper and more fierce. To ordinary people, just facing his glare alone would cause them to immediately cringe and freeze on the spot.

However, Haji still put a shallow smile, and bore his glare as if it was nothing.

“Using Mushitsuki to make this country fall into chaos --- and then let other countries invade us.”

Takakuwa’s silence affirmed Haji’s words.

“The existence of Mushitsuki will continue to increase. Sooner or later, it will develop to a stage where we can longer conceal its existence to the general public. Our country will no longer able to suppress their power--- that’s what you had been thinking about. And which is why you’re now planning to use them and make this country fall into chaos, and then trigger the involvement of other countries. There are many countries who are coveting our country’s capital. Once there’s an opening, invasion will most likely become a reality.”

Haji put away the shallow smile on his expression, and started glaring at the man in front of him.

“And then, use the overwhelming military force of other countries to wipe out (Mushi) --- and Mushitsuki altogether.”

“.....”

“It was none other but yourself that’s most afraid of Mushitsuki’s existence.”

The man who had his real intention exposed, still continued to put on a resolute attitude, looking directly at Haji.

“This country... is just too corrupted.”

Takakuwa then shifted his gaze away from Haji, towards the deserted road up ahead.

As if it was trying to cover up the road shrouded in silence, a tiny snowflake began to descend from the sky.

“The existence of (Mushi), is something that should have never existed. It’s a poison that will eventually overtake this country someday. But even after knowing this --- this country did not try to exterminate it, nor does it have the ability to. It’s indulging itself in brief peace, turning a blind eye away from the dirty things, engulfing in idleness and pleasure. To prevent things from turning to a point of no return, we have to thoroughly clean the issue from its root. Otherwise, the corruption of this country will not stop.”

“.....”

“Look, even the SEPB that was specially created to control Mushitsuki, was nothing but a paper tiger. When abnormalities such as (Fuyuhotaru) appear, I can easily foresee the image of its destruction. The only way to save this country --- is to wipe Mushitsuki’s existence out completely, and rebuild it all over again from its very roots.”

Haji exhaled a mouthful of white mist.

“Looks like you’ve already given up trying to protect this country by yourself.”

“The country itself has no such power, it can’t be helped.”

The man’s calm tone still remained unchanged even in this situation. Haji smiled once again.

“Just not so long ago, our country’s diplomat and other countries’ diplomats have signed a secret treaty.”

“A secret treaty...?”

“It’s about the Mushitsuki ‘s --- non-interference agreement within five years.”

Takakuwa could not help but widen his eyes.

“You said non-interference agreement?! How’s that possible, when did they sign such ---“

“It really did cost me a lot of time and energy to get all the connections I need... and a lot of things happened too.”

“You... what did you do!”

“Including SEPB’s Central Headquarters, many people wanted to continue concealing the existence of Mushitsuki. Although there were not a lot of countries that signed the treaty, and those who promised to provide support probably had their own motives and plans... but nonetheless, it will give us the buffer time we need. I guess this pays off a bit of the huge fund we paid to the other countries in return for signing the treaty.”

“Buffer? Buffering time you say? What do you think obtaining a few years of time will do anything to change this country?! What exactly are you planning on doing to fight against (Mushi), the existence that should have never existed?!

“Didn’t you say this earlier? This country does not have the power strong enough to suppress Mushitsuki. But, just then, we have finally obtained that power.”

“Obtained... the power? Where is such a thing?!”

“You should’ve seen it, just a moment ago.”

Takakuwa showed a baffled expression before falling into silence. And then immediately he was stunned for a moment as if he had realized something, and then hammered his fist down on the car’s roof.

“That kid?!”

“Mhm.”

“That Mushitsuki, who doesn’t even know what the hell is going on, is the power needed to change this country?! Ahaha, there’s gotta be a limit to how foolish your idea is. Isn’t that kid still lost? In my opinion,

my daughter is far better than him. But since she has turned into a Mushitsuki, it's a shame that I will eventually have to exterminate her as well."

"It is impossible to become stronger, without being lost first. Someone like you who has never experienced it before, will not understand even at the end of your lifetime."

"Stop spouting nonsense! I will not hand this country to the likes of you!"

"Mmm, for you, this level of downfall is probably nothing but being tripped by a small stone. Using the authority that the Takakuwa Family had built up till now, it's just a matter of time before you return to the front line..... but ---"

Haji stretched his arms forwards, and tugged Takakuwa's suit.

"No matter how many times you come back ---"

He did not shout, or strengthens his grip. But facing his glare, the terrifying gaze that had never changed before, was wavered for the first time ever.

"I will crush you thoroughly, as many times as I need to. Those who send their children as bait just because they became Mushitsuki, have absolutely no right to even talk about this country...!"

4.00

Shiika The Last

Amidst the never-ending whiteness, Shiika's silhouette could be seen slowly wandering about on the streets of the residential district.

Due to her having to constantly avoid the chase of the goggled Mushitsuki, both her body and mind had reached their limits. It seemed as if just a slight faint push from the winter breeze, was enough to make her fall.

The sceneries that expanded before and behind her, who was slowly trudging forward, were completely different in comparison.

Under the devastation of the glowing blizzard, nothing was left behind the path she had walked. Deserted houses were distorted, wire poles were shattered, and concrete floors were uprooted violently. Everything that existed in that space was silently crushed to powder before dispersing amidst the wind.

"...."

Shiika rubbed her hands for a moment, and blew out a mouthful of warm air trying to warm them up. Pure white snowflakes that fell from the sky were starting to pile up lightly on her scarf covering her collar.

Unknowingly, real snowflakes had begun to fall, mixing in among the floating snow surrounding Shiika.

Shiika raised her head lightly, and noticed the glowing firefly floating right above her. Being enveloped by the brilliant snow that it created and the natural snow, it continued to radiate with bright aura.

"It's cold..."

Shikka whispered that line at the firefly with a weak smile.

But suddenly, she blacked out without any warning.

And then --- she collapsed.

It wasn't until a loud sound echoed in her surroundings that caused her to come back to her senses.

After a good, long while, she finally realized that she had collapsed onto the snow. Her body was frozen stiff still, and she could hardly even feel her limbs anymore.

The loud sound that seemed as if it was coming directly from within, once again rang throughout the residential district. The storming snow caging her was scattered, even its wind direction was changed.

What was that sound? ---

She didn't have any spare strength left to even ask that question.

She could only feel the loud sound, which sounded as firing from a cannon, gradually close in on her. As the sound got closer and closer, the storming snow surrounding her would chip away bit by bit.

"...!"

Shiika suddenly stood up, causing the snow piled up on her back to immediately fall off.

She then once again made a step forward aimlessly.

She must run away.

If she were to stop here, her existence would disappear.

The sudden anxiety was driving her body, pushing her to move forward.

"Why... did it have to turn out this way..."

Shiika murmured to herself.

"That is because as long as we live, we will harm those around us."

On hearing the sudden voice, Shiika immediately turned her head around.

The scene in front of her was clearly engraved into her retina.

Since when did he start standing there?

Quietly ...

Just standing there silently.

A silhouette that seemed so fragile and ethereal as if it would disappear at any second, yet also seemed more vivid and stronger than anyone else.

A boy in black was standing there.

For an instant, Shiika thought she was looking at her reflection through a mirror.

But that was not it.

Aside from their age being similar, there was not the slightest similarity between her and the figure that was concealing his identity.

But, just from first glance, she felt that she and the boy in front of her were alike.

“Who...are you?”

She did not feel any fear.

Even though he had the exact same outfit as the ones that had been attacking her a moment ago, in her eyes, this boy was not a frightening existence.

Or maybe, she might have already forgotten what fear actually feels like. Her mind was becoming hazy, which gave a feeling that she had forgotten many things.

White smoke could be seen coming out from the pistol that the boy was holding in his hand. If the loud sound from earlier were to come from his pistol, it meant that this boy in front was actually the first one ever to come to her side by his strength alone.

The her, who everyone was afraid of, who everyone would flee immediately after seeing her presence... only him, only this boy who she felt was alike, came to her side.

“(Kakkou).”

The boy replied flatly.

Shiika, and this boy who claimed to be (Kakkou), silently exchanged glances for a while.

During this time, Shiika could feel the emptiness within gradually expanding.

The boy called (Kakkou) didn’t say anything, or do anything.

In Shiika’s eyes, it seemed as if this boy covered in injuries was crying.

“What is... your dream?”

(Kakkou) suddenly asked that question.

Her consciousness that was drifting away, immediately cleared up upon hearing that.

My... dream ---

The fuzzy image of her family slowly emerged within her.

The school that she went to everyday ---

As well as the smile of the goggles-wearing teenage girl, who had acknowledged her dream,

Something very precious, very important...

Something that she had been treasuring in her heart for a very long time.

The goggles-wearing teenager praised that it was a nice dream.

That's why, right now... she feels reconciled and sorrowful to have her dream devoured by this white firefly --- by the existence of (Mushi).

"My dream is... to find a place that would allow me to stay..."

The hand that held the pistol, suddenly shuddered.

"Your dream is very similar to mine..."

"Really...?"

"Yeah."

Seeing the boy nodding his head, a burst of joy suddenly filled her heart.

Someone who has a similar dream as her ---

Hoping to find a place where one belongs. This boy in front of her had been hoping to realize the same dream, and had been protecting it till now.

Shiika looked up at the white firefly.

The firefly obediently listened to Shiika's last wish, and gently flew in front of her.

It would be too sorrowful to just let this (Mushi) devour my dream until the end like this...

If only... I could make up the resolve to stand for my dream from my (Mushi) a bit sooner... a bit earlier... it probably wouldn't have come to this end right?

But the Shiika now does not have any strength left.

If so, let's entrust everything to the boy in front of her then, entrusting him the resolve to stand for one's dream, and the courage to fight against the (Mushi); let's entrust it all to him...

Hoping that one day, he could realize the same dream as her.

"Then, I will give my dream to you!"

Shiika held onto the tiny white firefly, and handed it towards the boy.

(Kakkou) immediately widened his eyes. He seemed to have been perplexed by Shiika's unexpected action.

"I don't have any dreams left ... that is why, I'm going to give my dream to you. If one day, you are able to fulfill your dream, please remember my dream as well, okay?"

Tears began to roll down from the corner of her eyes.

The tears that she originally thought had dried up long ago along with her emotions, overflowed with her feelings once again.

"So, please don't ever give up on your dream!"

(Kakkou) silently gazed back at the crying Shiika.

Just from looking at his silhouette, she could tell that he must have had many difficulties of his own. That dazed standing posture of his, seemed like a lost child who didn't know where to go, didn't know which road to pick, and that's why he just stood there.

But then, he clenched his lips.

Showing an expression as if he had finally decided --- finally found a path to move on, and nodded his head:

"I understand."

The boy then gradually raised his pistol, and aimed at Shiika's white firefly.

She could tell; the confusion and vulnerability enveloping him from before, had transformed into a strong will.

"I promise you, I will never give up. So one day, you must ---"

The finger that was pressing against the trigger was infused with more strength.

"You must remember your dream as well."

"Mhm, I promise you."

The smiling Shiika, and the (Kakkou) who was clenching his lips, exchanged glance for the last time.

A heavy gunshot then echoed throughout the streets of the residential district covered in snow.

While hearing the echo of the gunshot fading away, Shiika could feel her consciousness, and her dream, falling deep into the darkness ---



Epilogue

Kakkou The Last

After walking out of the school gate with his classmates, he immediately noticed a black-colored car that was parked on the side.

And just when (Kakkou) shifted his gaze to that direction, the car's door suddenly opened.

Walking out from the driver's seat was a young man putting on a shallow smile. He was dressed in an expensive-looking suit as usual, but rather than gloomy gray, today he was in a full navy blue.

"Sorry guys, I guess I can't go play with you today as well. I just remembered I had something important to do."

On the face of (Kakkou) who was putting a smile, many Band-Aids could still be seen sticking all over. By using "falling down the stairs" as an excuse, he somehow managed to cover up for his injuries from his peers and teachers.

"Eh---?! Again? What'll we do without you?!"

"I'm really sorry! Kinoshita, play for me this time as well okay?!"

Leaving behind his complaining friends, (Kakkou) sped towards the young man. Due to the injuries from the previous battles, just a little sprinting alone was enough to make his whole body rebel in pain.

Haji Keigo, as usual, greeted (Kakkou) with a shallow smile.

"Look at you and your body covered with wounds. I can't believe you still want to go to school in that kind of condition, shouldn't you at least take today off?"

"Weren't you the one who kicked me out when I said *that*, and said "it would be suspicious so I should still go"?!"

"Ah, did I really say that?"

"...Whatever, putting that aside, what is it that you want? Didn't I tell you to not come and pick me up?"

"No no, I just wanted to let you know about the current situation as soon as possible."

Facing the silent him, the young man lightly clapped his hands, making *Papa* sounds.

"First of all, congratulations to you! You have been officially promoted to Kashu level one ranked."

"That sort of thing doesn't make me happy at all, you know?"

"I guess it was only natural for them to do so as matter of course. After all, you were the one who successfully captured the Ishu level one ranked (Fuyuhotaru)."

Hearing Haji's frivolous tone, (Kakkou) zipped his lips into a straight line.

(Fuyuhotaru) --- that girl's last smile, he could still remember it vividly even now.

No matter how many years pass by, he would never be able to forget.

"(Fuyuhotaru) will be accommodated in the isolation facilities used to isolate the Fallen, (Garden). In addition, despite her having turned into a Fallen already, we thought it would be best to arrange a watcher to monitor her. The one chosen for this task, was the combatant who had failed this operation and was downgraded from Kashu level three ranked to a Kashu level five ranked, (Namie). I heard she personally volunteered to be (Fuyuhotaru)'s watcher."

"...Is that so ---"

"And lastly, as the hero who put this commotion to an end, me, I have finally obtained the title of branch director of the East Central Division. With this, you can say that we both have found a place where we belong, even though it is just temporary."

"..."

(Kakkou) didn't say a word, just merely gazed at the far eastern sky.

The snow from yesterday had already disappeared without a trace. A clear, blue sky filled his view. In the direction of (Kakkou)'s gaze, there was a neighboring city called Hashiba City.

(Garden) --- An isolation facility under SEPB East Central Division's surveillance was located in that city.

"The resolve to do anything to protect your dream, do you have it now?"

Upon hearing Haji's question, (Kakkou) replied right away:

"I've already made a promise with (Fuyuhotaru)... to never give up realizing my dream. Moreover, she hasn't given up yet; she promised me she will one day remember her dream. As long as she lives, someday she will definitely..."

(Kakkou) gazed wordlessly at his tightly clenching fists.

The instant when he pulled the trigger on (Fuyuhotaru)'s (Mushi), he had already made up his mind.

No matter how painful and shameful the path would be, no matter how much resentment he has to shoulder, he would definitely protect his dream to the bitter end. Because in his heart, there were the feelings of the girl who had the same dream as him infused deep inside.

After looking at (Kakkou)'s profile, Haji once again showed a shallow smile.

“To remember her dream one day huh... I did not expect her to be able to say such words right before she turned into a Fallen. No wonder she was just as strong as you.”

Hearing the “Click” sound, (Kakkou) turned around and saw the young man opening the door to the driver’s seat and was taking a seat. He then raised another question he had on his mind.

“How’s Takakuwa? Is he arrested?”

“Still undergoing interrogation.”

Haji leaned against the door, and said sarcastically.

“I’m afraid he will not be sentenced. Using Mushitsuki to trigger a coup; there’s no way we could release something like that to the public. And besides, Takakuwa himself has a wide range of connections and influence. But I’m sure he won’t be able to do anything within a time period. In regard to that man, there’s nothing else we should be worry about, but ---“

“But--?”

“The impact that man has caused is immeasurable. After all, he has caused a large amount of Mushitsuki to appear before the public. The existence of Mushitsuki will surely cause an even bigger uproar compared to before. Even Mushitsuki themselves are gradually changing as well. Since the number is still growing, and even Strong Mushitsuki like you and (Fuyuhotaru) have appeared... who knows what will happen next...”

“It’ll be fine.”

He replied wryly.

“To survive, we just have to keep on winning – isn’t that right?”

“Yeah, we can’t lose, not until the day we realize our dreams.”

Leaving behind his usual smile, Haji sat in the car.

After seeing the car drive off, (Kakkou) turned around and made a step forward.

Walking on the sidewalk, (Kakkou)’s expression rapidly transformed into that of an ordinary school boy. Everything he had been doing was for the sake of hiding his Mushitsuki’s identity. From now on, he must continue this disguise, and act like an ordinary person without any special traits.

“Well then... I wonder if I can still make it if I go now... Kinoshita really sucks at that game after all.”

The green Kakkou Mushi that slowly descended from the sky began to chase after the boy who suddenly increased his pace.

ムシウタ

00. 夢の始まり

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Ce Light Novel Translation

Hey guys~

This is the end of Shiika's Arc of Volume 0. You may proceed to Volume one after this, the 2nd part of this Volume 0 is still being translated. It's like a spin-off of the main story so it's best for you to come back later on after you finished the 3 volumes that were already translated. I'll release another PDF containing only that arc later on when I'm done translating it. Feel free to check the progress on the CE translation website.

And lastly, thank you for reading, I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I do.

Happy new year to you all and be safe!~

- Wing, 2014





00・夢の始まり

Kyohai Iwai

岩井恭平

ムシウタ

MU SHI-UTA

角川スニーカー文庫



ムシウタ

MU SHI-UTA

00. 夢の始まり

岩井恭平

Where is the place of belonging...

that I can enjoy happiness...?

Rina



立花利菜

Rina Tachibana

後に虫憑きのレジスタンス組織“むしばね”のリーダー“レイディー・バード”となる。



大喰い

Oogui



虫憑きを生むといわれる三体の謎めいた存在——“始まりの三匹”の一匹。自らは“エルピオレーネ”と名乗る。詩歌や利菜のような、“分離型”の虫憑きを生み出す。

漫父

Shinpu



“始まりの三匹”の一匹。自らは“ディオレストイ”と名乗る。ハルキヨや千莉のような“特殊型”の虫憑きを生み出す。

三匹目

Sanbikime



“始まりの三匹”の一匹。自らは“アリア・ヴァレイ”と名乗る。その生態は他の二匹に比べても謎が多い。大助や初季のような“同化型”の虫憑きを生み出す。

Characters of MUSHI UTA

キャラクター紹介



薬屋大助

Daisuke Kusuriya

特別環境保全事務局—特環の東中央支部局員“かっこう”。

杏本詩歌

Shiika Anmoto



その特異な能力から“ふゆほたる”と名づけられた虫憑き。

土師圭吾

Keigo Haji



特環東中央支部支部長補佐。皮肉な口調が特徴的だが、かっこうとは強い絆がある。





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夢の黄昏

MU

SHI

UTA



Ce Light Novel Translation

SEPB's classification:

Kashu: Title given to Mushitsuki that had outstanding ability in combat. Almost all of the currently existing Mushitsuki belong to this category.

Ishu: Title given to Mushitsuki that had some sort of special ability.

Hishu: Title given to Mushitsuki that had all sort of unique condition. This title is one of the rarest, not that many was given such title in the whole series. So far Shiika is the only one that had obtained this title. (Because she's the only one that awakened from Fallen status.)

(Mushi) Types:

Minion Type: Also known as separation type whereas the Mushi would be separated from the host themselves. This is the most populated type of all, near 80% (estimated) of Mushitsuki population had this type.

Special Type: Every Mushi of this type have no physical shape of itself, but might form one when it activates its ability which would mostly likely be control of certain medium within its territory. IE: Fire, electricity, gravity, etc.

Fusion Type: The rarest type of all. The Mushi of this type would fuse itself with Mushitsuki's body + weapon to activate its ability and further grant super human strength, speed, and durability to its host.

Enjoy ~

-Wing

0.00

The Others

“Hmm.....”

As the quilt fell off, Shiika wriggled her body and wrinkled her eyes.

As she slowly opened her eyes, a stabbing pain attacked her eyelids. Maybe it was because she had been crying before going to sleep, and unconsciously cried in her sleep as well.

She had a dream last night.

She dreamed of something that had happened to her four years before. Last morning, she had the same dream.

In her dream, she was turned into a Mushitsuki by a woman, called (Oogui), lost control of the new power --- and then had her (Mushi) killed by a boy called (Kakkou).

Her dream was going to be eaten up by her (Mushi), which almost caused her to ‘die’.

That was why she entrusted her dream to a Mushitsuki called (Kakkou), who had the same dream as her.

And now ---

Shiika recalled her dream, and had come back to her birthplace, Ouka City. While being chased by the SPEB, she was taken in by a girl, Tachibana Rina.

“.....Rina?”

Shiika asked in a soft voice, however, she found the space next to her empty behind the quilt nearby.

December nights were very cold.

Shiika took and put on her cardigan, and got out of the bed.

“Hu.....”

She breathed out with a white puff, and walked to the door.

“Well, so you don’t see it the same way either, we are really -- “

There came Rina’s voice from the hallway.

Shiika began to giggle.

Yesterday morning was just the same: After Shiika woke up, she found Rina talking on the phone, just like now.

After walking out of the bedroom, Shiika could see Rina's figure sitting on the porch closing her mobile phone.

Even without lights here, this girl's beauty and her sense of presence still shone brightly.

"Rina."

This girl called "Tachibana Rina" was an inconceivable person.

Despite her being the leader of the (Mushibane), who fought against the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, she treated others with honesty and gentleness. Though they had only met for a short period of time, this Mushitsuki girl, who harbored the same dream as Shiika, had already become an irreplaceable being to Shiika.

Rina peeked at Shiika, with an impish smile on her face.

".....I remembered something that I forgot, but it wastes too much time and takes too long to get it.....so I managed to make it come back by itself."

"Something you forgot... make it come back by itself??"

"Because it is something that wouldn't even move no matter how you push or pull it..... Sorry, did I wake you up?"

Shiika shook her head, and sat down beside her. And then, Rina smiled, looking a little uncertain and doubtful.

"You helped me in front of your boyfriend yesterday, are you regretting it?"

Shiika continued to shake her head silently.

The boy who told Shiika that he wanted to be her friend --- Kusuriya Daisuke. The event of them playing together at the amusement park had already become a part of the past. At the amusement park, Shiika accidentally came across Rina who was fighting against the SEPB all by herself. For the sake of helping her, Shiika revealed the secret of her being a Mushitsuki in front of Daisuke.

Daisuke had once said that he was scared of Mushitsuki, so he must have felt really terrified of Shiika when he found out the truth.

But even so, Shiika didn't feel any regret, because she succeeded in helping Rina. She was sure that she would never regret that.

Nonetheless, if said that she didn't feel sad at all, she'd be lying.

"Shiika, you are very kind."

Shiika shook her head once more.

The true kind person should be Rina. If Rina hadn't helped Shiika selflessly, she would have been caught by SEPB, yes, just like what happened four years ago.

Even the members of (Mushibane) who adore Rina, calling her (Ladybug), were also the same. Like them and Shiika, those who were saved because of her gentleness and kindness, must have been countless.

"Don't worry, we will definitely find a way!"

Rina smiled with a strong will. Her voice was filled with confidence and optimism, making Shiika feel warmth in her frozen heart.

"Rina..."

"Hmm?"

"How did you become a Mushitsuki?"

Upon hearing that, the girl reflected in Shiika's pupils, suddenly tightened her expression.

".....I'm sorry."

But, Rina replied with a smile right away.

"Why did you say sorry first? Even though you were clearly feeling lost about your boyfriend, and after I forcefully questioned you on your identity being (Fuyuhotaru), not to mention bringing up all your painful memories from turning into Fallen by (Kakkou)..."

"....."

"So now it is my turn--."

How can Rina have such a strong will? ---

Gazing at this cheerfully smiling girl, Shiika couldn't help but come up with such a question in her heart.

Shiika wanted to know; what was it that made her so powerful, powerful enough to carry the fate of countless Mushitsuki in (Mushibane) on her back, to confront the SEPB, and, to smile, even while enduring the fear towards her (Mushi).

Maybe if she were to know the source of her strength, she might able grow stronger. Yes, just like this girl in front of her, Tachibana Rina ---

"About me, umm.....I still don't recognize what was the beginning. So many things have happened till now, but nothing seemed very special to me."

Rina spoke confusedly, while pulling up her hair behind her ear with her fingers.

Even this little behavior was full of glamour, deeply attracting Shiika's attention.

"I encountered three Mushitsuki at that time.....though it sounds weird, but they were actually normal, no more special than the guys in Mushibane at all."

"Three Mushitsuki?"

"Right, I think I helped them in those days. And while doing so, I was turned into a Mushitsuki unknowingly."

"....."

"Oh, don't stare at me like that, I will talk about it in detail --- it is better to explain things one by one rather than put everything together in a mess right? And, although I helped them, it was nothing amazing."

"So how did you help them?"

"I ran away from home."

Looking at Shiika's confused expression, Rina seemed to feel amused and poked her nose lightly.

"Though I said there was no beginning.....Umm, maybe that time when I ran away from home, was the beginning of my dream."

In the dusty hallway before dawn, the teenage girl began to talk.

Began to talk about what happened in the past.

Akin to an old-faded-photograph-liked tale --- which Rina had experienced at that time.

I.00

A Centipede

In the center of a residential district, a three story high dwelling was standing like piled up building blocks.

And somewhere on the third floor of this dwelling, there was a cage imprisoning Tachibana Rina.

The narrow room had no television; it only had the bare minimum amount of furniture. Ever since elementary school, the teddy bear on her bed was probably the only trait of a girl's room that she had. It was a present her mother gave her on her birthday, but rather than buying it for Rina, it was more like she brought it for herself.

The sound of the clock running was echoing in the tranquil room.

Instead of studying, Rina began to draw a landscape on her unfolded notebook.

Suddenly ---

A loud "Bang!" broke out.

"....."

Rina clenched her pencil tighter subconsciously.

The sound of her father censuring in a loud voice "--- Didn't I tell you before?!" and her mother apologizing in a weak voice "---I'm sorry..." could be heard ringing.

Tension, with a slight fear --- and certainly anger, distorted Rina's expression.

That goddamn father ---

Rina cursed in her heart. To a young child like Rina, it was the minimum resistance that she could do.

No, the one that could stop her father's absurd actions probably didn't even exist in this world. Every adult that she knew of listened obediently to whatever her father said. Even if they were the police, that fact didn't change the slightest.

"Why are you drawing again? Have you finished all the questions I gave you?"

A hand suddenly reached out beside her, and snatched away the notebook on the desk.

In the narrow room, Rina was not alone. Behind her back, stood a skinny supervisor-like female.

It was Rina's private teacher, Mikajima Yorozu. It was said that she graduated first place from a nearby high school that had the highest graduation standards. Though she had a pretty face suited to be

wearing glasses, her sharp-pointed hairstyle and her sharp look, made it hard for people to describe her as a beauty.

"..."

Something feels wrong...

Rina supported her cheek as she thought of that.

She tilted her face as she turned to look outside through the only window.

Shouldn't an elementary student be more free and open? Why does every single one of them always inculcate so many rules on me?

Outside the window, expanded a scenery that was exactly the same as the one Rina drew in her notebook.

Rina really loved the scenery she could see through the window.

Especially at dusk, the big red setting sun would illuminate the whole street; dying it full of vivid orange light. It was as if it was trying to softly wash away the dark emotions clustered inside Rina's heart.

The sunset glow slowly rendered the streets of Akamaki City from orange to red.

At a distance away from where a splinter-like object could be seen, was the observation tower known as Akamaki Skypia, which was undergoing construction. To Rina, the building was nothing but another hateful target. However, under the gaze of the sunset, it was just a plain shadow.

"All answers are correct!"

Mikajima suddenly shouted.

"Uh ---"

Upon being stared at by the private teacher, Rina could not help but tighten her expression.

Even though she immediately prepared to defend at once, it was still too late.

"You learn really fast! As a reward (to me), please fondle my head!"

The lady much older than Rina unexpectedly knelt in front of her.

She placed her head on Rina's lap, and stopped moving as if she was waiting for something.

"Come on! Hurry~"

"....."

Seriously, something felt extremely wrong...

Rina frowned as she fondled Mikajima's head randomly for a second.

"Ahh. Rina-san... You are just too prefect. "

Looking down at Mikajima showing an intoxicated expression, Rina couldn't help but heave a sigh.

Though still young, she had begun to comprehend the things about herself ever since she entered higher grade of elementary school.

For some reason --- it seemed like she did have some kind of glamour.

Even though the lady who wanted Rina to fondle her head was a weirdo, it was true that Rina was often depended on and trusted by others. Needless to mention her classmates, even some teachers would consult with her for some serious problems too, not to mention some of those problems were pretty barefaced to a point where it was questionable whether it was right for a child to even hear it.

"No matter it's the goddess of the harvest, or the art buried in the bottom of the sea for a long time washing, they will all be shame to confront you."

"....."

Again, Mikajima Yorozu was indeed a special example, but nonetheless, Rina does have the glamour that would attract others.

About the cause and reason, even she herself didn't know either.

But, perhaps ---

"Hmm..."

While fondling Mikajima's head, Rina looked out at the streetscape through the window.

The streetscape she overlooked was changing little by little every day. It was not the change akin to new buildings being built, or leaves changing their color, but rather the changes of people crossing back and forth on the streets. The changes of their clothing, their hairstyle, their age, those were constantly changing.

Recently, Rina was starting to enjoy observing a certain park very much.

Several days ago, a street performer suddenly appeared in the park, which was really rare in this age. From the look of the figure's bodyline and the face made up with white rouge powder, the person should be a teenage girl. From time to time, she would dance like a puppet, doing tricks on a round ball, and juggling colorful balls. Due to the coincidence that the park happened to directly face a kindergarten, many parents would often stop by the park with their children to enjoy the show. The scenery of them clapping their hands fascinated really gave a heart-warming feeling.

"....."

Let see, is there anything new today?...

Rina shifted her sight away from the park, to a far distance.

And there, she found a figure standing still in an alley. On the streets where it was filled with the scenery of trees swaying in the wind, and pedestrians going back home --- only that figure was standing still, as if time had stopped.

Because the distance was too far, Rina couldn't see that person's face.

"Hey, Mikajima."

"Yes? Rina-san."

"Can you give the performer some food today as well? I think she is hungry."

"I refuse. Why should I give that humble performer anything to eat?"

"Also, I wonder what happened to the man in the third street.....Can you help me ask him?"

"I won't do it. Why do I have to talk to a stranger anyway."

"Don't be so mean like that ok? If you don't listen, I'm not going to fondle your head anymore."

"....."

"Okay, hurry up! You know I can't go outside, don't you?"

Mikajima stood up reluctantly, before slowly walking out of the room apathetically.

"Ah, wait a sec!"

"Are you going to show your mercy and spare me?!"

"One more person!"

"Oh, my god....."

Rina leaned her body out the window.

The traveling street performer, and the standing still figure.

Far away from these two people, Rina noticed another figure. The figure was moving cautiously between wire poles and alleys as if he was avoiding being seen by others. Judging from his slender figure, the figure should be a kid. His age seemed relatively close to Rina's.

Is he playing hide-and-seek? Or hiding away from someone he doesn't want to meet?

No.

“Go help that kid too.”

The real reason why everyone adored Rina was ---

“That kid must have some troubles too.”

Rina --- she could make out who was seeking for help.

Seeing people engulfed by tragedy, her chest would feel pain as well.

It was as if she had heard a soundless lament, which resonated with her heart.

She could tell who were those that needed salvation.

“Listen carefully, the street performer, the manand that kid, got it?”

In the streets dyed by the red sunset, the three people were scattered about in a triangle.

They were the passers-by of her harboring dream,

And at the same time ---

An existence, called Mushitsuki, which Rina encountered for the first time ever.

Rina Part 1

The elementary school that Rina was attending was a private elite school that also ran a kindergarten simultaneously.

It was also a uniform-required school which was rare in the area. Students all must wear school uniforms, whilst in addition, female students must wear skirts paired with black stockings. Although its location was somewhat far away from the city center, due to its high graduation rates into one of the top elite schools of Akamaki City --- Horusu Seijyou Gakuen Middle School, it was pretty well known within the city.

As soon as Rina got out of her family's private car, she was immediately surrounded by many smiling faces.

"Good morning, Rina."

"Morning, Rina-san."

"Hey, did you watch the TV last night?"

"Yo, did you know what happened after that from last time?"

Rina walked through the school gate, passed by the garden before entering a classical style corridor of the school campus.

While walking towards her classroom, the students surrounding her piled up even more.

Some of them were her classmates, some were students from the same grade, while others were students from different grade and classes, and they all turned around and greeted Rina.

"Hii, good morning~"

Rina replied in a relaxed manner to everyone that she saw. In school, there was no sign of her father's stern gaze, and the monitoring of her private tutor, that's why there was no need for her to maintain her elegant and noble figure.

Her class teacher passed by, and greeted her as well with a smiling face.

"Good morning, Tachibana-san."

Isn't that a bit... obvious that she just greeted me and ignored other students around?

Despite thinking of that, Rina still replied with a smile and "Good morning" greeting.

The teacher, who once had a stress disorder from teaching, had turned to Rina for help when Rina was volunteering as a counselor. Ever since then, she began to rely on Rina more and more. If Rina were to graduate, what would she do then? That question was one of many that Rina was concerning about.

Right after she walked into the classroom with her classmates, the noise of quarrelling rang throughout.

The classroom was split into two sides by the boys and girls, arguing with each other.

“Why did you lie?!”

“I told you I don’t know what you’re talking about!” --- The atmosphere felt as if it was about to explode.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

Right after Rina spoke, the girls all rushed behind Rina’s back. Upon seeing the girls had taken Rina to their side, the boys immediately became cowardly.

“That guy completely ignored us yesterday when we saw him at the station!”

“Don’t trust them Rina, he was playing soccer with us all day yesterday!”

After asking for more details, it seemed like the girls came across the boy yesterday at the station. They tried to greet him, but he ignored him. From what the boys were saying, it sounded like that boy was playing with them the entire day.

“Maybe you got the wrong person?”

Rina gave a suggestion, but it only caused the argument to burst out again. “Yeah, what she said!”. “No! That was definitely him!” It seemed like no matter which side Rina stood on, they would not give up so easily.

“Ahh I see, I get the reason why the person that shouldn’t have been there was there now.”

Everyone’s gaze fell onto Rina.

“--- It’s gotta be this right?”

Rina raised her hands in front of her chest, acting like a ghost. This caused everyone’s expression to become pale instantly.

“Uuu so scary~ so scary~ I don’t wanna talk about ghost and the-likes anymore~”

Rina left while saying that, making the girls hug one another together screaming leaving the boys showing terrified expressions. They soon disbanded after that.

Meanwhile, Rina walked towards the boy who had been the center of the topic, lightly placed her finger in front of her lips and smiled, telling him that it was a joke. Even though it was unknown whether

ghosts really existed or not, if she were to mention it, they most likely wouldn't bring up the argument ever again. The truth was that they probably mistook someone as him.

On seeing the boy press his chest in relief, Rina walked to her seat and put down her book bag.

She then surveyed the noisy classroom for a moment.

“What, that guy...again?...”

“What’s wrong Rina?”

“I’m going to bring back the escapee!”

Facing the surprised classmates with her back, Rina rushed out of the classroom.

There was still a little time remaining before homeroom starts.

In the corridor, with everyone was rushing towards their respective classrooms, Rina was the only one running in the opposite direction.

She opened the door to the school rooftop, and rushed through, staring at the boy who was sitting next to a flowerless garden.

“...?”

It was a boy wearing a black shirt paired with a cotton vest. Rina reached her fist in front of the boy’s face.

With a sound of “Pa”, Rina flicked away the cigarette that was in his mouth with her forefinger.

“Homeroom is about to start, you know?”

“I’m cutting it.”

The boy replied blankly while stepping on the cigarette on the floor. His name is Shirotani Reiji, a boy who had been in the same class as her ever since kindergarten; a boy that had a unique bond to Rina.

Rina sat down next to Reiji, and hugged her knees.

“I found people needing help again! There are three this time!”

“Just ignore them. It’s none of your business to help them anyway.”

“How can I ignore them? It’s normal to help others who need help, is it not?”

“I’m abnormal anyway, so I don’t understand.”

“Why do you always say “anyway”?! Nonetheless, you probably wouldn’t care, since you’re a delinquent after all.”

“Whatever.”

Despite being a delinquent, Shirotani Reiji’s grades were just as excellent as Rina’s, he also had the same talent for sport as her. The only difference between them was their communication and social skills.

Different from the Rina who could almost strike up a conversation with anyone, this boy next to her would never take interest in anyone else.

Parent’s expectations, the homeroom teacher’s one-sided reliance, those gaze filled with admiration and goodness which came from others ---

Rina, who was almost engulfed by this sea of gazes, would occasionally come to his side to change her mood. Even though she could just go somewhere quiet to be alone, Rina, who couldn’t bring herself to do that, would come to Reiji’s side to relax.

No matter how tired Rina was, she could never have her own time.

She could never be alone.

This has gotta be one of my characteristics --- This thought would strike her again later when she was a little older.

“Need my help?”

“Nope, it’s okay.”

Upon seeing he asked that question with an uninterested expression, Rina immediately rejected him.

Just then, the preparation bell for homeroom rang.

“Oh shoot! We’re gonna be late!”

Rina immediately stood up, whilst pulling Reiji’s arm and forcing him to stand up as well.

Since Rina had perfect attendance till now, it’d be terrible if she were to be late this time. In the case of her teacher calling her family purely out of worry, it would no doubt enrage her father, and the arrow of his anger would definitely be directed at her mother ---

Rina bit her lips, and began to run.

“Didn’t I say I’m going to cut class?”

“I can’t hear you! Come, hurry up!”

When arriving at the entrance of the rooftop, Rina suddenly stopped.

“What’s wrong?”

No... We can't go this way... The second floor's corridor is still locked during this hour, the only way we can make it to the next building is through the corridor of the first floor and go up again, but that --- will be too late.

"We're gonna take a shortcut!"

"Huh? Hey, what are you planning on ---"

Rina let go of Reiji's hand, facing the entrance of the rooftop with her back and started running. She climbed up the stairs that was set up next to the water tank tower onto the little storage room's roof, and then started dashing toward the rooftop's edge.

"H-Hey...! Wait, what are you doing idiot?!"

On Hearing Reiji's unusually panicked shouting voice, the smile on Rina's expression deepened. Her long hair swung behind her as she ran and used all of her energy to make a leap over the fence of the rooftop.

"Ri---!"

Reiji's shouting was wiped out by the sound of furious wind.

As if it was telling Rina to go back, the fierce wind pushed her body back forcefully, but Rina faced it straight on. Her body was falling from a few meters high midair towards the ground. The feeling of balance and sound had already disappeared; all she could feel was a comfortable sense of falling embracing her tightly.

Immersing herself in the joy from being released from the chain of gravity, Rina showed an even bigger smile.

It felt as if she could just fly to somewhere far away like this ---

And be freed from the cages of her family and school.

Even for someone like Rina who would reach her hand to anyone who needs help, she would definitely -
--

One day ---

By the time Reiji ran to the fence, Rina's legs were already standing on something firm. After rolling for quite a while, she finally stood up.

The Rina who raised her head was located in between the rooftop and the ground --- which means on the rooftop of the corridor connecting two campus buildings.

"Haa...Haa..."

After having pulled back into the reality from her moment of fantasy, Rina turned to look at the other end of the corridor roof --- at the windows of the 3rd floor campus building up ahead.

The feeling of having to return to the reality caused Rina to show a wry smile.

No matter how high I jumped, no matter where I wanted to fly to ---

In the end, all I could was struggle endlessly in this birdcage.

“Reiji, hurry up!”

She then turned her gaze back at the rooftop, only to see Reiji showing an expression of helplessness. That was a rare expression from him.

“Are you crazy?! Do you want to die or something?”

“You can definitely do it! Come on, jump!”

Rina reached her hand toward her childhood friend without any hesitation and smiled.

For a moment --- Reiji was deeply fascinated by that bright smile of her.

“...Hmph, I ain’t crazy like you.”

After coming back to his senses, he said that line as he slowly moved away from the fence.

However, Rina still remained standing smiling.

And then, in the next instant ---

A small shadow, suddenly leaped over the rooftop’s fence from the water tank tower.

After a few seconds, the figure landed before Rina --- right on the roof of the corridor. Rina reached out her hands to catch the rolling Reiji.

“Hehe, trying to act cool, you also wanted to try it didn’t you.”

“...Heh.”

Reiji stood up, and showed a rare smile.

Rina pulled his arms again.

“That doesn’t matter, what matters the most right now --- is that the campus building’s windows are closed.”

“Ehh---?! We gotta get it open then! Hmm...Hey you!”

Rina started shouting and waving her hand at the student next to the window as she and Reiji ran towards the campus building’s window on the corridor’s roof.

After school ---

After walking out of the school gate, a high-class luxury black car could be seen parking in front, waiting for Rina as usual.

“Bye bye, See you tomorrow.”

After waving goodbye to her classmates, Rina then sat into the back of the car. The driver mechanically greeted her with one line “Welcome back, Milady.”

“...”

Aside from her school and home, Rina was not allowed to go anywhere else. She quietly placed her book bag on the seat next to her as the car quietly started moving.

The sceneries passed by the car’s window were filled with a variety of charms. The laughing couple, the teenagers walking in groups while eating, the elderly who were leisurely taking a stroll with their pets.

The sceneries filled with joy that could be seen almost anywhere, but Rina have never experienced any of that ---

Feeling it was a little hard to breathe in the closed car, Rina slightly opened the car’s window. A refreshing breeze blew away the gloomy feeling piled up in her heart by a bit.

“If you wanted to reject me, then clearly say so! Why did you --- go as far as finding the excuse that you didn’t get invite!... If you don’t like me, then just say that to me directly!”

“I-I really didn’t receive that invite or invitation of that sort!...Beside I went somewhere far away to work yesterday! There’s no way ---“

When the car stopped at an intersection, a seemingly white-collar couple was arguing in the middle of the streets. Due to their loud shouting, the surrounding pedestrians all turned around to look at them.

Thinking back at it, a similar dispute like this happened back at school as well didn’t it? ... Is it popular to mistake people nowadays??

As the car drove on once again, Rina noticed a familiar figure amidst the crowd.

It was a tall slender teenage boy, wearing a clean tidy outfit with a small hat on his head as decoration. But with a hairstyle close to an afro, there was no way such a tiny little hat would fit, Rina thought to herself.

He was one of the trio that Rina saw from her window the day before. The teenage boy was the same from yesterday as well, standing there quietly by himself among the crowd. His existence was very weak; none of the pedestrians noticed him as they walked pass by him.

“Ah...”

Just when Rina was about to shout out to him, the car she was sitting in drove past him.

The driver turned around and asked:

“What’s wrong, Milady?”

Rina only replied with this “...It’s nothing.”

I guess I will go ask Mikajima about him later on...

When the car drove near her house, Rina suddenly said this to the driver:

“Ah, could you stop over there, just for a moment.”

The driver pretended that he didn’t hear her; the adults around Rina would only listen to what her father said.

“Stop at once!”

Rina showed a stern expression and said that line with a sharp tone.

This surprised the driver causing him to immediately step on the brake pedal. Perhaps it was because of him seeing Rina’s looks, which were almost the same as her father that caused him to be terrified for a moment.

Rina then shifted her gaze away with a “Hmph”. Even after knowing that the driver would definitely report to her father for doing this, she still wanted to see it no matter what. The hard slap that would come right after the scolding, she would gladly take it.

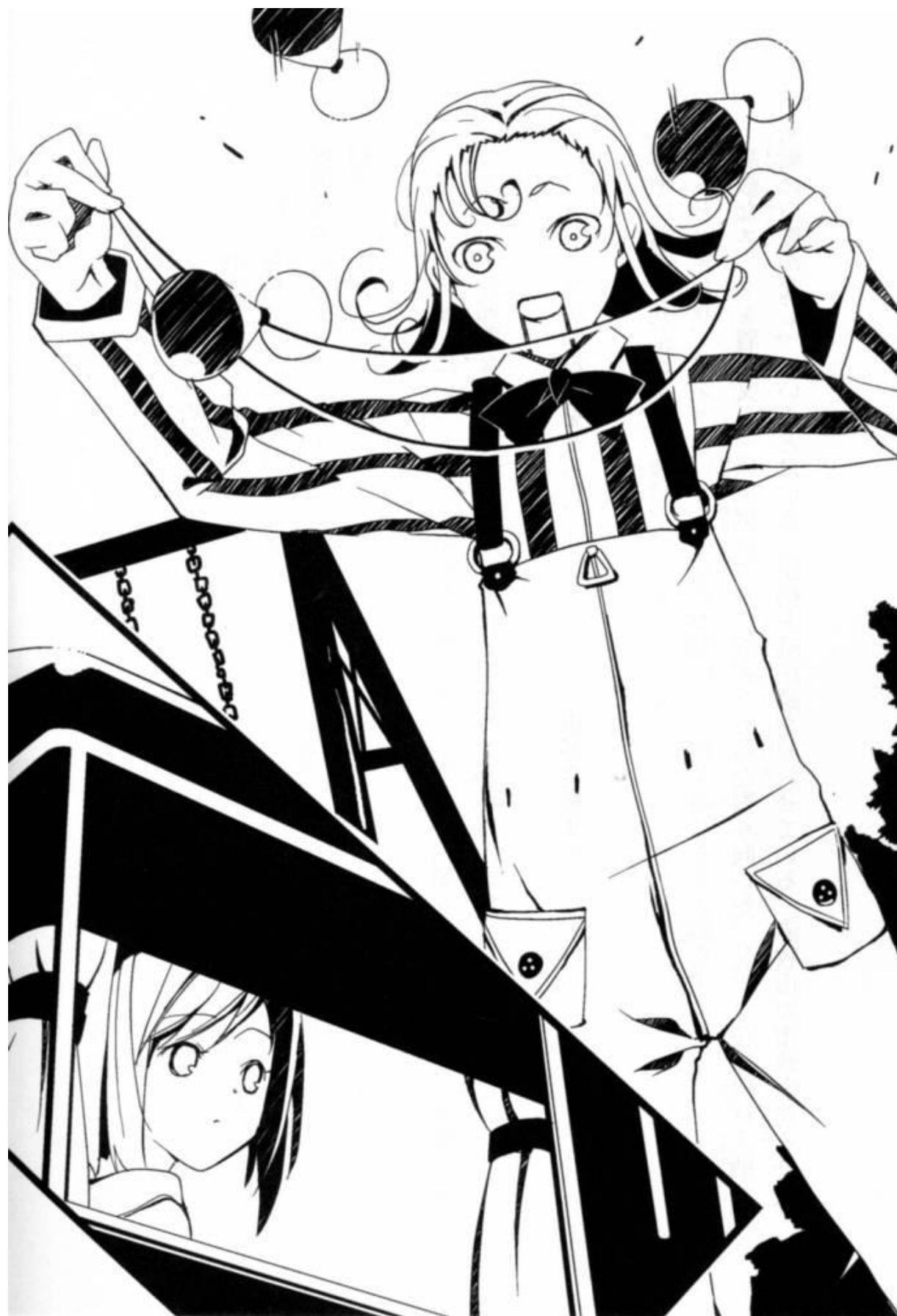
The place where the car had stopped was the park not far away from her house. After pulling down the car’s window completely, a melody that seemed to be coming from a music box came flowing to her ears.

In front of the swings located in the park, there was a group of people gathering about. The group mainly consisted of parents with their children, with a little new reporter mixing in between.

There was even a photographer taking shots among the crowd.

In the center of the crowd, there was a figure wearing a strange uniform, wearing big white gloves on both hands, a face painted with white powder and curly hair, and had two parallel lines drawn straight down to the cheek from the corner of the lip --- The figure was just like an enlarged version of a clown doll.

This figure who suddenly appeared in this park unknowingly was a wandering acrobat. Usually, only kids in the area would gather about, but it seemed like the news had finally reached the ears of news reporters. On the swing there was a huge box holding numerous music boxes, with one of them playing a very energetic light melody.



The throwing ball tricks and balloon acrobatics had caused the kids to jump up and down in joy, and when the figure did a handstand on a big ball, the atmosphere skyrocketed. Despite the figure looking like a girl in her teens, her slender arms and legs were doing the tricks flawlessly, just like a professional acrobat.

And just then, the melody coming from the music box suddenly changed.

It seemed like the performance had moved on to its final stage, the pantomime show that Rina enjoys the most --- No, it was more like a dance.

Accompanied by that creepy melody that started unknowingly, the weird puppet next to the acrobat began to dance stiffly. Its joints were twitching about before starting to dance unnaturally.

“Children are my food --- I want to eat them all --- making crack-crack sounds, start eating from the brain --- come, come closer here ---”

This surprised Rina a bit, because she had always watched the show from her window, it was her first time listening to that “puppet’s” voice. That doll began to dance as it sang along with the melody. Like a spider, it crawled towards the children near it. The mouth making cracking sounds, suddenly laughed.

Just when the kids were scared and started crying, the puppet’s head suddenly popped off. Looking at its funny gesture trying to put back on its lost head with its hands, the kids that were about to cry immediately went back to laughing once again.

The puppet that had finally picked up its head and placed it right back, suddenly raised its head.

Its eyes met Rina’s eyes directly.

“...?”

That puppet, which narrowed its eyes for an instant, was looking at none other but Rina, and for the first time ever it smiled like a human. Facing its dreadful smile, Rina could feel a chill running down her spine.

“Let’s go.”

Shifting her gaze away from the puppet, Rina told the driver to move on. The car then started moving.

“.....I’m back.”

After arriving home, Rina crossed the gate and walked into the living room.

Right at the moment she stepped into the room, a crispy “Pa!” slap sound rang. Rina’s shoulders trembled for a moment.

Her father that was standing in his suit, and her mother that had fall onto the floor both turned to look at Rina at the same time. Her father --- Tachibana Kaeki was a tall burly man. Even though he had some white hair mixing in his hair, the overwhelming presence and coercion coming from him didn’t give any

sign of aging. Being one of the main governors in control of the Akamaki City, no one could oppose him or his actions. Surrounding him, who possessed vicious charisma, was a group of despicable companions that obeyed and committed dirty jobs for him.

Her mother who had fallen onto the floor holding her cheek --- Tachibana Kouyou, was a slender beauty. But due to her fragile body, she gave the exact opposite impression of her father.

The father Kaeki who was upstart after the bloodline of a royal family, and the mother who was a sacrifice thrown out by her family to reverse her the decline of her family's title --- Rina had inherited both of their characteristics.

“....”

After seeing her mother who was lying on the floor, Rina slowly raised her head and glared at her father who was way taller than her by a few heads.

“What’s with that look of yours, how dare you look at me like that ---”

“N-No, please don’t hit Rina ---”

Her father wanted to walk towards Rina, but her mother desperately tried to dissuade him.

As for Rina, she continued to glare at her father with sharp eyes.

It was a scene that she was already familiar with. The father who abused with violence for no reason at all, and the mother who took it all in silently.

It was because that she was overly familiar with this scene --- that it began to lose feelings for her recently. No fear, no anger, it was as if she was looking at the scene from a very far distance, watching everything happening with her cold heart.

The only thing that was different, was that she could feel a dark, shady impulse, slowly building up within her.

At the same time, something precious in Rina’s heart was slowly sinking away, like the sand slipping out from an hourglass.

Her father pushed her mother out of the way with a “Hmph.”, and then left the room.

“I’m sorry, Rina. Don’t worry about me, I’m fine.”

Her mother then embraced Rina in her trembling arms. Rina buried her face into her hug, and mechanically returned her embrace.

Although Rina love her gentle mother, she doesn’t understand why she was apologizing.

Marrying her father for the sake of her family, and not divorcing even till now was none other than her. If she were apologizing for *that*, then doesn't it also mean that she was regretting the fact she had given birth to Rina...?

"It's okay, mom."

There was something that Rina still had to do, and that was to save her pitiful mother.

She then showed a warm smile.

On seeing Rina's smile, her mother showed an eased expression, as if she was salvaged. She then embraced Rina tightly.

It's still fine now.

Because inside Rina, in that hourglass of hers, there was still some sand remaining.

"--- Welcome back, Rina-san."

After walking into her room, she immediately saw her private tutor Mikajima turn around and greet her.

"Mikajima... Could you not hug my clothes while waiting for me in my room?..."

Upon seeing the college student who was hugging the clothes that she was about to change into while showing an intoxicated expression, Rina felt like she was about to have another mental episode.

This is seriously wrong... Rina twitched her brows as she snatched back her clothes.

"But I feel so lonely without you. Look, I even warmed up your clothes for you so please praise me~"

"...Woah... Why is it so warm... it feels disgusting..."

"Thank you~"

Even refuting an "I'm not praising you" line felt stupid. Rina just ignored her and changed into her casual clothes. Of course, Mikajima was staring at her the whole time while she was changing.

"...Mikajima, you seemed to be waiting for me at home all the time, do you even go to school?"

"I've already found the perfect goal of my life, what's the point of me going to university then? The knowledge of a traveler who has traveled thousands of miles, the courage of an adventurer who journeyed across the mountain of thorns, and the morals of a monk who has to undergo hundreds of years training to obtain, I've already obtained a priceless treasure weighing more than the three of them combined together."

"I did not understand a word you just said... Do your friends and family not worry about you?"

“Compared to you, they are nothing but merely pebbles on the street.”

“You have to cherish your friends and family, you know?”

Rina threw the teddy bear lying on the bed at Mikajima.

“That side of you, who doesn’t have the slightest intention of doing that, is also very beautiful.”

Mikajima placed the teddy bear that she caught next to the window.

“But if you were to order me, then I will cherish them.”

“.....”

It was not as if she had never thought that before, it was just that she didn’t understand it very well herself.

The father who acts like a tyrant, and the mother who endures it in silence, aside from those two, Rina doesn’t have anyone else as family. Are those really things that she should cherish?

Moreover, Rina didn’t really have anyone who she could call friends. There were only classmates who overly relied on her, and a childhood acquaintance who she knew for a long time. If one were to ask her who she would cherish, the first thing that would come to her mind was them as a whole, not some individual’s face.

“Oh, by the way, did you go help those people like I asked yesterday?”

“Ah... Yes. Though I was reluctant to, I still followed your orders so please don’t worry.”

“And? What happened?”

“That dirty entertainer didn’t even say thank you and just kept on dancing. That tall teenage boy, I couldn’t find him in the end. There was no sign of anyone having traits like you said in the area when I searched.”

“Hmm...? That’s impossible, I just saw him on my way back from school today.”

“As expected from Rina-san, but when I searched for him, there was really no one like that in the area. If I couldn’t find him, then that means he didn’t exist there at that moment.”

“I think that’s impossible... Eh? Why did similar things keep happening today...?”

“And as for the third person you asked, that boy, is currently being kept somewhere safe. It seemed like he was running away from home, that’s all. There’s nothing about him that Rina-san you should worry at all.”

Rina, who was about to sit on the chair in front of her desk, suddenly turned around and stared fiercely at Mikajima.

“That kind of phrasing... What are you trying to hide from me?”

“Nothing at all, Milady.”

“If you aren't honest, I'm going to stop petting your head from now on.”

“...Please just forget about that kid. He's an existence that you shouldn't mingle with.”

Facing the Mikajima who was sealing her lips, Rina stared even harder.

After a short moment of silence, the private tutor seemed to have given up and sighed. She pushed up her glasses with her finger and said:

“That boy --- is a Mushitsuki.”

(Mushi) ---

The supernatural being that had suddenly appeared a few years ago, was given such a name.

Processing forms akin to insects, they would infest themselves onto adolescent teenagers and devour their dreams and hopes to grow. Those who were infested by these (Mushi) --- were called the Mushitsuki. Once infested, they would all have to bear the same tragic destiny; either have their (Mushi) get killed and themselves turn into emotionless walking corpses, or die when their dreams were fully devoured by the (Mushi).

Above were the rumors that were spreading about.

In addition, eye witnesses and encounters continued to grow among the public, especially recently, at a city called Ouka City there was even an army of Mushitsuki marching.

Nonetheless, even under such conditions the government still refused to acknowledge (Mushi)'s existence. Rumor also mentioned that the government deliberately created a secret organization to control such matters, concealing its intelligence.

Rina was not the type to be afraid of insects. That's why after she heard about the rumors regarding (Mushi) she thought that if "they" really existed, they would look nothing but tiny and cute.

That --- was her exact thought, before she encounters a real (Mushi) for the first time ever.

"Heyo."

After poking her upper body from her window, she slowly climbed out and stood on the little protruding spots on the wall of the house. Letting the wind sway her hair as it pleases, she stuck close to the wall and started climbing down.

"W-Woah, phew, t-that was close."

Just when she almost slipped and lost her balance, she grabbed onto the metal pipe that was used for discharging the rainwater.

Akamaki City's night view was filled with flickering lights everywhere.

And amidst this glorious view, there was a gem sparkling brighter than anything else. The tall building that was as tiny as a thorn in day light, was now gleaming in green lights.

The building that was embraced by green aura, was known as Skypia --- Akamaki City's observatory tower. It was rumored that its highest floor, which was completely surrounded by half-transparent glasses, was designed to look like a garden of sky.

"Seems like... I brought a bit too much..."

Right now she felt as if she were a thief, or maybe a spy. She was wearing shirts and shorts that were easy to move around in, a pair of sneakers that she secretly hid in advance, and was carrying a huge backpack behind her back; you could say she was thoroughly prepared.

Holding onto the metal pipe, she slid down to the ground and silently crossed the yard. All the blind spots from the surveillance cameras and other security measures had been confirmed in advance.

"---- Safe~"

The route to escape *this* birdcage, she had been exploring it since long ago.

But deep down she knew, even if she were to escape from here, she would never be able to escape from her father's palm.

That's why every time when that thought came across her mind, she would feel helpless; which was also why the escape plan remained as a fantasy in her head.

After escaping from her residence, Rina began to run furiously onto the night streets.

There was a purpose as to why she escaped tonight. She was planning on returning home as soon as she accomplished that purpose.

"Eh?"

Just when she was about to pass by the park located next to the kindergarten, she suddenly came to a stop.

In the center of the deserted playground stood a shadow in a very unnatural stance under the constant flashing street light.

"Why is she still here this late...?"

Rina subconsciously stepped into the park. Even though her destination lay elsewhere, she just couldn't help but feel drawn towards that strange figure.

As if it had felt the presence of the unexpected visitor, the music box suddenly rang throughout. The figure then slowly walked toward Rina stiffly while making cracking sounds.

It was the acrobatic girl from this morning. She was walking closer and closer to Rina.

"Children are my food --- I'm going to eat them all, not leaving even one --- Guru Guru, biting from the head downward--- come, come here closer ---"

The music box's sorrowful melody, her hoarse voice, and creepy movements.

All of the above had caused a chill to run down Rina's spine for an instant, which made her to immediately halt. When the puppet girl finally stopped in front of her, lowering her gaze and opened her mouth wider and wider, she felt as if she was about to get swallowed in.

Despite her feeling afraid from the puppet girl's unmoving gaze, she still mustered up the courage and asked:

"I-It's already this late at night, are you still waiting for customers?"

The puppet girl immediately stopped, and moved her head up and down as if she was nodding.

"Don't you feel dispirited? To keep on doing this, don't you feel tired from it?"

The puppet girl then moved her head left and right, denying.

It seems like she was capable of answering questions, Rina could feel her fear easing just from seeing her responses and continued.

"Where and when do you sleep? Is your body okay? Are you hungry??---"

"--- I'm fine."

The puppet girl opened her mouth and said that line, it sounded just like a doll speaking with Ventriloquism.

"Rokko, can eat children."

"Rokko? Is that your name? And--- What do you mean eating children...?"

"Guru Guru, biting from their head downward."

"Y-You're lying! You ate the food that Mikajima brought you right?"

"You, looks very delicious."

"Eh?"

Rokko curved her lips and started smiling, before turning around. She walked back to her original spot and raised her finger, pointing at a location.

The direction where her finger was pointing at, was Rina's room.

"You know me?!"

"You, are the most delicious kid. One day, I will definitely eat you up."

"If Rokko were to eat me ---- will Rokko... be saved then?"

"...."

For an instant, Rina caught a glimpse of Rokko showing a human expression, a human emotion; confusion. She could tell that it was not an act.

"Because no matter how much food Mikajima brought you, you seemed to be always hungry."

"..."

"To me, it seems like you always have an uneasy expression as if you were looking for help."

Just then, the sound of music box suddenly stopped.

Rina turned her back on the motionless Rokko, and said:

"I will definitely help you one day, but not right now, so please wait just a bit longer, okay?"

Since tonight's goal was to find someone else, leaving behind the unmoving Rokko in the dark quiet park, Rina began to run once again onto the streets.

Just when she was panting heavily from running, she suddenly encountered another visitor.

It was a teenage boy who wears a tiny hat on his head as a decoration. With a slender figure and outfit, he seemed just like a magician on a stage.

The only thing that was unbecoming from his elegant expression and atmosphere, was the pair of mechanical goggles that hanging by his neck.

"...Good evening."

Rina stopped her steps in front of the teenage boy.

"Good evening to you too, young lady."

He shifted his gaze from gazing at the sky down to Rina, showing a gentle smile.

"Please immediately turn around, go head straight home."

The teenage boy spoke with a steady voice that was just as calm as the night.

"It's very dangerous to stroll around at night, let alone talking to strangers. You should hurry home before you're swallowed whole by the monster pretending to be a puppet. If you're lost, then I shall take your hand and walk you home."

"I have to go somewhere right now, that's why I can't go home yet."

"Is that so? If that's the case, then head straight there, don't wander off to elsewhere."

"Who are you? Are you also lost?"

The teenage boy's brow twitched for a moment, he then tilted his head before smiling.

"What makes you think I'm lost?"

"Aren't you walking back and forth on the streets since a few days ago? And also ---"

After telling him the reason why she thought he was lost, the teenage boy seemed to be surprised.

After that Rina chatted with him for a while.

Just as Rina was interested of him, he seemed to be also interested in Rina. Under the streets lit by streets lamps, laughter and chitchats could be heard from the duo.

The teenage boy who processed a magical atmosphere around him, self-proclaimed to be "Mr. Hat House".

"Goodnight, Mr. Hat House."

"Mhm, Good bye."

After gently bidding farewell to the waving Mr. Hat House, Rina finally dashed towards her destination.

The scenery around her began to change as she ran, following after the high class residential area into low-rise bungalow-lined streets, and then finally into a construction area where large numbers of wooden frame houses could be seen. As the distance from the City center increased, the number of street lamps decreased dramatically.

"I think it's around here... Ah, it must be that one!"

At the corner of the construction area, she found the large building that she was looking for. Inside the rectangle-shaped structure, which was exposed on top of the soil without anything sheltering it, there was not a single trace of light. Judging from its appearance, it seemed to be a storage room for materials. Next to the slightly opened door, construction materials that had turned pitch black from the weather could be seen.

Rina surveyed her surroundings closely as she stepped into the interior. Right when she stepped into the ruin, she heard a calm breathing.

"Good evening. How are you doing? Still okay?"

A glimpse of moonlight illuminated the figure that was huddling in the corner.

A young boy that was around the same age as Rina. He was hugging his knees with both hands, silently staring at the intruder who came out of nowhere. His clothing was very dirty, and there were many plastic bags from the convenient store lying around him.

"I'm Tachibana Rina. Didn't someone take you here? That person is Mikajima Yorozu, she's my tutor."

"....."

"What is your name? And where do you come from?"

Rina walked towards him casually as she spoke. The boy, however, was still curling from fear. His gaze towards Rina was filled with clear hostility as he desperately tried to move back.

"You don't have to be scared. I noticed you through my room's window, it seems like you're in trouble, so I was thinking if I can do anything to help you."

"...Don't come over.."

"Didn't I say I'm just wanted to help you, why are you still this scared?"

Just then, the boy who was pushed back against the wall suddenly stood up.

"Right. I heard you're --- a Mushitsuki, is that true?"

Mushitsuki ---

On the shoulder of the boy who trembled upon hearing that word, a centipede crawled past. She could only see it quickly crawl behind him before the storage was hit by small quake.

Behind the boy, a pair of shining compound eyes appeared. Accompanied by the sound of repeated clicking sounds, a huge shadow raised in front of her. On its body that was broken into segments, countless legs were wriggling about. The antennas on its head reached outward as its sharp teeth grinded against each other, making strange sounds.

"T-This is... a (Mushi)...?..."

Raising her head to look at the monster that was bigger than her by many folds, Rina could not help but gasp with a hoarse voice.

Even after hearing the whole incident from Mikajima, Rina wasn't feeling fear towards the existence known as (Mushi). That was because she continued to follow her belief that (Mushi) were nothing but "small and cute insects".

"D-Don't... come closer!"

As if it was synchronized to the boy's trembling voice, the centipede gave out a sign of warning. It wriggled its ten meter long body and grinded its sharp teeth.

"Uu---"

Just "small and cute insects" --- What a naïve thought she was having. The creature which appeared before her was not small and cute at all.

It was a monster.

Seeing an alien existence for the first time ever in her life, her legs were shaking nonstop.

"Y-You're also a Mushitsuki right?! Why are you following after me?! You must be one of those SPEB's people!"

The boy's reaction was just the same as Mikajima had described.

When Mikajima had found him, he was terrified just like now. Mikajima said after she told him the location of this storage and that she had put some money and food here, she left immediately.

Rina bit her lips as she infused some strength into her shaking legs.

""SEPB"? What's that, I don't know such thing."

She then slowly walked toward the boy who was guarded by the centipede.

"And beside, I'm not a Mushitsuki."

"Didn't I tell you to not come closer?!!"

The centipede's huge body moved closer to Rina all of sudden. It whipped out its long body across the storage house, and sent Rina flying aside.

"Ugh--!"

Her shoulder crashed into the wall, and then her body fell down to the ground. It was a heavy impact that made her feel as if all her bones had been crushed. She even lost her breath for a moment. Her waist, shoulder and even her forehead were crying in extreme pain from the impact. Rina gripped the sand and dirt on the ground in her palm tightly as the taste of blood spread out within her mouth.

"You--- little ---!"

Rina could feel all of the blood in her body was rushing towards her aching head.

--- Please don't hit Rina ...!

In the head of Rina who was distorting her expression, suddenly flashed the image of her mother hugging her father's legs begging him to stop.

Rina hated pain. Because to her, pain equals the memories of her being beaten up by her father, and at the same time, making her remember the figure of her mother enduring from abuse.

"Didn't I just tell you --- I'M NOT A MUSHITSUKI!"

Rina shouted out loud before walking furiously towards the boy once again. Perhaps the impact had also injured her head, she could feel a warm liquid running down from her temple to near her throat.

"S-Stop coming closer..!"

"You're afraid of an ordinary girl that's not even a Mushitsuki?! You coward!"

The Centipede raised its head once again towards Rina.

"Do it, I dare you! If you want to be a murderer then do it!"

The boy twisted his face as the centipede suddenly stopped its movement.

Walking past the stiff centipede, Rina walked up to him in an instant. The first thing she did when she walked up to him, was gave him a hard slap in the face.

"Ugh..!"

"If you have something to say, then say it with your damn mouth!"

She then tugged his shirt, pushed him against the wall.

"If you want to hit someone, then do it with your own hands! Don't use your (Mushi), you coward!"

"Uu...u..."

"Don't come closer? Go away? You liar! That's obviously not you're thinking! Or else you would have not come here in the first place, am I right?!"

"Uuh----"

"What do you actually want me to do?! Say it with your own mouth!"

The boy covered the side of his cheeks that was slapped as his expression distorted even more.

"Save--"

From the eyes of the boy gazing at Rina, large tears began to overflow.

"Save me..."

"-- Good."

Rina nodded her head before she let go of the hands tugging the boy and showed a smile.

"Then I'll save you."

The smile she showed came directly from her heart; she had that intention from the start.

She doesn't know the meaning of the word destiny.

But even so, she could feel it.

From the one imitating a puppet, or the one staying at the corner the street, or ---the one telling her not to come any closer with a terrified gaze ---

She could tell who longs for help, and will continue to encounter these kinds of people.

If she could tell, then she would not stand idly by. After all, she's had that kind of personality since birth, and the talents that built up her confidence to act.

Up till now, Rina had always been doing things like that.

Definitely --- till death, she would continue to do so.

Because of harboring such thoughts, Rina never had any hesitation.

"---"

Became fascinated by her smile, from the corner of the boy's eyes --- shedded last drop of tear.

After a while ---

Rina and the boy sat shoulder by shoulder next to each other, hugging their knees.

"Special... Environmental Preservation Board..?"

"It's... the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau."

"I-I know that!"

The first Mushitsuki that Rina encountered, the boy who self-claimed himself as Hibino Kazufusa, said that he was being chased by a secret organization created by the government purposely to capture Mushitsuki, known as the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

"Unforgivable, how could they seize people just because they are Mushitsuki..."

On the forehead of Rina who puffed her cheeks, a large piece of gauze could be seen. The wound inflicted by Kazufusa's centipede was very shallow, hence she was able to perform first aid solely from the emergency first aid kit that Mikajima brought and left behind just in case.

"Those guys... are also Mushitsuki."

"Eh?"

"They must be close... I'll definitely get caught this time..."

Kazufusa buried his chin into his knees, staring up ahead with his gloomy eyes.

She could tell, before arriving here, he must have gone through a lot of things. Perhaps it was because of lack of sleep due to fear, heavy eye bags could be seen under his eyes.

"..."

Rina silently gazed at the profile of Kazufusa that was worn out from fatigue.

A boy that was overwhelmed by the upcoming fear, just merely trembling in the dark; His figure looked as if he was already defeated by an irresistible power, and had lost all of his will to run away.

"It's over... It's impossible to help me..."

"---You're right."

Rina nodded her head frankly, and stood up.

Rina couldn't even handle Kazufusa's (Mushi), let alone defeating the enemies chasing after him.

She took a step outside of the storage, before turning around.

"..."

Kazufusa raised his head to look at Rina.

He probably thought that Rina had turned back on her words of helping him, and decided to run away from here. That's why, the gaze of the boy looking at her became even darker and gloomier than ever.

Yes, just as the boy had thought, Rina was going to run away.

She originally had planned to just come here and have a talk with Kazufusa, and then return home immediately. But now, she changed her mind.

Perhaps --- all the things that she couldn't do on her own till now, if there were two people, it might be possible to accomplish them then.

For the sake of giving him courage, I must muster up courage as well!

"Let's run away, Kazufusa!"

Facing the boy who was curled up, Rina reached out her hand towards him as if she was inviting him.

Kazufusa widened his eyes.

"We will keep running, until the guys behind give up completely!"

"B-But, I'm already..."

"But what, there are two of us."

Facing the frowning Kazufusa, Rina showed another bright smile.

"I'll run away together with you."

Kazufusa was stunned completely, not moving the slightest. Rina could not help but have to go back to the boy and pulled his hand.

“With the two of us, we can definitely run to anywhere!”

Through the doors of the storage, a ray of bright sun light shot in.

Holding onto the hand of Rina who stood facing the light with her back, the Mushitsuki who was drawn by her smile, stood up.

Rina Part 3

Due to the location of the warehouse Kazufusa was hiding at being near the outskirts of the city, the escape from Akamaki City was really easy.

They didn't have a clear destination.

And to avoid attention, Rina and Kazufusa purposely selected alleyways to travel along. Inside Rina's backpack were the rations and emergency aids that Mikajima had left behind at the warehouse. The two of them took turns carrying the backpack. After walking for a few hours, they reached a river.

The long shadows of two elementary students extended along the shore of the river bank, and would occasionally pass by the strolling elderly or students walking home from school.

"Thank god I brought enough money with me. It looks like we don't have to worry about food for a while."

Even though they have already walked for more than half a day, Rina was as lively as ever. She energetically swung her hands and feet back and forth, making light steps on the overgrown road.

"....."

On the other hand, Kazufusa was filled with uneasiness. He would very often look around him to survey the situation out of fear. And every time when he walked by a person, he would lower his head trembling.

"Where should we sleep tonight? If we go to a small restaurant, they might notify the police for counseling."

"....."

"Hey Kazufusa, before you came to Akamaki City, what kind of places do you sleep in?"

"I didn't... sleep much."

Although Kazufusa didn't talk much, he had already revealed to Rina everything about his background on the way.

It seemed like his parents were doctors of a dispatch-cooperation. During the period of following his parents overseas to help those in poverty and sickness, he began to harbor wishes of helping them.

--- Wanting to save those poor people and kids from overseas --

Every time he returned to his fertile country, he would have such thoughts, and eventually it became his dream.

He said he became a Mushitsuki just like that.

“Then you need a good night's sleep tonight! As long as we take turns watching, we should be able to get a good night's sleep!”

“ ... ”

Kazufusa had also said, because the centipede infesting in him suddenly caused a commotion and attracted people's attention, he was being chased by strange people.

--- “I'm from the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. Due to your (Mushi) being unstable, it must be exterminated.”

The person, who appeared before Kazufusa, had only said that line.

Although he managed to escape that time, he was found out again and again. And every time that person would repeat the same line before attacking him. During the constant repeat of the same process, both his heart and body had already reached its limits.

“It would be troublesome if it were to rain, we should find a place with a roof... Mmm, where would be nice...?”

On the other end of the river, the burning red sun began to set.

Until yesterday, during this period Rina would always look out from her little window to gaze at this scene before drawing it into her notebook.

She never learned to draw or paint from anyone. Even if she were to say she wanted to, her father would not allow her to learn any arts that were unnecessary to her education.

It had been quite a long time since the last time she looked at this scene somewhere aside from her home.

The sunset that dyed the endless sky into a deep red, deeply imprinted onto her retina.

“Say, where do you think we should go?”

“ ”

Right now, an Akamaki City without Rina, what would become of it?

In the school where she was inexcusably absent, would her home room teacher fall into a panic because of it? Without Rina as their center, what kind of topic would her classmates come up with?

Most importantly, what would happen to her father? Maybe even someone like him would be shaken for the first time ever, and start worrying for his only daughter who had gone missing. As for the Mikajima who indulged herself in Rina's shadow, perhaps despair with her life?

I think it's best to let them worry for a bit.

To make them realize that, it was wrong to keep Rina in that birdcage.

"Before that, we should buy our dinner for tonight first. What do you wanna eat? Going to the convenience store?"

"...Hey."

"Hey 'who'? I have a name you know! It's Rina."

"You should go back..."

The only thing she was worrying about was her mother.

Even though she thought that her father might be worried --- after thinking it over again, there was no way that would happen at all. That damn old man would definitely be pissed off from Rina's selfish actions.

And the arrow of anger would no doubt be pointed at her mother.

But deep in her heart --- she really hoped that her mother would reconsider.

Staying by that awful man for the sake of the family, it was definitely a wrong decision.

Using this chance, it would be best for her to make up her mind and be separated from him.

Her mother was too kind.

The reason why she was feeling inexplicable restlessness towards that kindness, was it because of the lineage of her father?

When that thought came across her mind, she suddenly had the impulse of draining all of her blood from her body.

But even if she did that it would be meaningless --- Rina overlapped the red setting sun with her blood, and suppressed that impulse within.

"What's up with you all of sudden, saying things like I should go back?"

Rina turned around and forked her arms onto her waist.

"It's impossible to escape from them... Beside, you're not even a Mushitsuki..."

Kazufusa raised his eyes that had heavy eye bags and gazed at the horizon at the end of the river.

--- Impossible to escape.

That line reined Rina's chest tightly.

Perhaps, it might be that way. But it was only limited to Rina's situation. For Kazufusa, it is not something that will absolutely happen.

"Saying it again? --- Let me ask you, why are you so sure that you can't escape from them?"

"Because I've already been found out many times by them... I'll definitely be found out soon again..."

"But didn't you manage to escape every time when you were found? If so, there might be one day where you can really escape from them?"

"I might get killed the next time they find me... and if you were together with me, you might even get ..."

Rina walked closer to the Kazufusa who was mumbling, and poked his dirty forehead with her index finger.

"Till now, have you been doing it seriously?"

"Huh...?"

"I'm serious about this, I'm even fully prepared to die if I have to. I'm definitely!~ Absolutely!~ going to do it!!!"

Looking at the Rina who suddenly burst out shouting at the sky, Kazufusa fell into a panic.

"Y-You Idiot! I-If you were to shout like that ---!"

"Have you really tried your best to escape?! To an extent where you can puff out your chest and shout it out, just like me?"

Rina suddenly moved her face closer as she asked that. Kazufusa was surprised for a moment before looking away with blushing cheeks.

"See, you never really tried it seriously! That's why this time, you have to do it with everything you got! Don't be afraid, because I'll be with you! We're going to seriously and definitely run away for sure!"

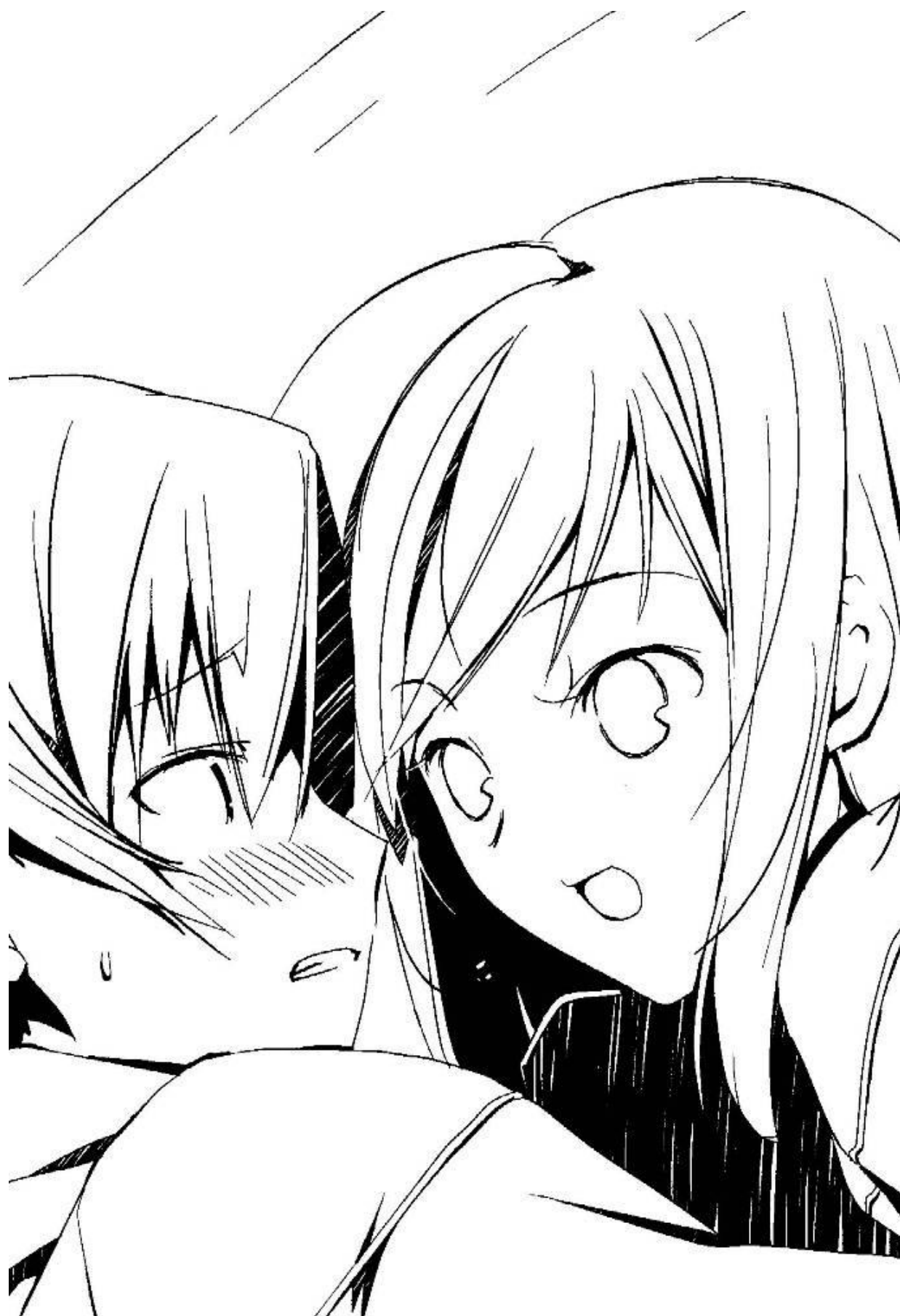
"Doing it seriously..."

"Yup! We're going to keep on running, till the guys chasing after us can do nothing but give up!"

Facing the Rina who made a fist as she shouted her declaration, Kazufusa could not help but show a helpless expression.

"You... must be an idiot."

"I'm not an idiot, I'm serious!"



Rina smiled, before taking steps again along the shore of the river.

The presence of the Mushitsuki boy remained motionless, not moving the slightest. But very soon, the sound of his footsteps trotting behind came, trying to catch up.

“...Aha.”

It was the first time she had heard him laughing.

“You are really an idiot after all.”

“Didn’t I say I’m not?! In school, I have the best grades you know?!”

On the shore that was gradually dimming, both Rina and Kazufusa moved forward.

No matter where they go.

No matter where it leads them.

On the path where one doesn’t know where it would end up, as long as they don’t stop and continued moving forward.

Every time she made a step forward, Rina could feel her heart skip a beat from excitement.

Maybe --- Just maybe ...

If they were to keep on running, maybe one day, she might be able to escape from that narrow birdcage.

Maybe, she might be able to find, aside from that house that was filled with noises that she didn’t want to hear, another place where she belongs---

“Ahh, I have an idea! If we were to ride on your (Mushi), wouldn’t it be easier for us?!”

“But if we were to do that, we would be found out immediately. There’s no meaning in us escaping anymore then right? Stupid.”

A run-away that was filled with childish thoughts.

But both the run-away girl and Mushitsuki boy, who were walking along the shore, showed bright smiles.

They clearly harbored such hopes deep within their tiny chests.

The first night after they escaped from Akamaki City was spent inside a small hut which was filled with dust and smell of rusty iron.

It was a small hut built above the embankment for the purpose of storing water-pumping supplies. Within the hut that was covered by cracked concrete walls, there was space the size of Rina's room left.

It seemed like there were a lot of farmlands nearby; small huts like this could be seen every now and then.

The second night the two of them found a similar hut again and secretly slipped inside to sleep.

“Good morning, Kazufusa.”

When it was morning, Rina would wake up the Mushitsuki boy.

On the face of Kazufusa who was barely replying with an “...Mm...”, an expression of fatigue could be clearly seen.

Due to them having to fall asleep next to the pumps that made squealing noises all night long, they couldn't fully erase their fatigue.

“Come, let's hurry. We're going to give our all today as well!”

Although she tried to squeeze a bright smile onto her face, Rina's body was just as heavy.

Despite her being one of the few that had the most stamina among her classmates, the lifestyle of a run-away's constant walking was just too much for her as well.

Although it seemed like they had been following the river all day, it was not all they'd done. They would go to a convenience store to buy rations from time to time. They even took baths at a run-down bathhouse in a town recently, and went to a store to buy a change of clothes.

“Oh yeah Rina, where did you go this morning?”

“Mm?”

“Because when I woke up, I noticed that you were not in the hut...”

“O-Oh, it was nothing. I just went and took care of my restroom business.”

“Ahh --- Sorry for asking!”

While changing to irrelevant topics as they left the small hut, they began to set off along the shore once again.

Kazufusa's mental condition had pretty much calmed down compared to before. As a result of that, he had told Rina a lot more about himself since yesterday, he even mentioned about the school he was attending.

But today, he was not as talkative as yesterday.

It was also the same for Rina. Even though she pretended to be energetic, deep down she knew that she was doing nothing but talking loudly.

It has only been three days ---

A journey that didn't even last that long, had already deprived most of the energy and stamina within the two children.

In particular, Kazufusa's fatigue was very serious. Perhaps it was due to the reason that he consumed pretty much all of his stamina before coming to Akamaki City. Even though he could sleep at night, in Rina's eyes, she could tell that he was already near his limits.

But even so, Rina and Kazufusa continued to rush forwards.

Scary enemies were after them. If they didn't hurry, there was no way that they could be saved.

"...."

Rina turned around to take a look, only to see that Kazufusa was panting, and could barely even raise his head.

But, I can't say any discouraging words.

"You okay? Wanna take a break?"

"I'm fine."

Kazufusa immediately raised his head, and forced a smile onto his face.

"We have to run further away... This time, I'll give it my all."

Rina could not help but widen her eyes as an inexplicable burst of joy filled her heart, and smiled.

Thank god, I'm not alone.

Not just to Kazufusa, but also to herself as well. If she were alone, she would definitely never be able to make the first step to run away from home.

She intended to tell him about her and her family issue after a while. After all, till yesterday he had it hard just from worrying about himself. Perhaps right now, he might have some spare mind to take in the reason why she decided to run away from home.

"Well said! Kazufusa, you're so cool!"

"I-I'm not cool at all... It's all because of Rina that I was able to ..."

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"I-It's nothing!"

"Is that so? How about --- over there? Why don't we go over there and take a break?"

At the direction where Rina was pointing at, there was a small sluice.

It was probably one of the facilities used to supply water to the farmlands during farming seasons. On the embankment that was exposed to soil, only the area near the sluice had been maintained, and further paved with concrete. The sluice itself was about ten meters high; one could see the metal ladders on its side and the big turntable switch located at its top.

Rina and Kazufusa both walked down the uneven hills, and arrived before the slice.

“Kazufusa, wanna take a drink?”

Rina put down the luggage before turning around to ask Kazufusa.

However the Mushitsuki boy was standing stiff still with a pale face.

“...? What’s wrong?”

“Ah--- Ah---“

Kazufusa was fixing his gaze in a different direction, while moving back slowly with his feet.

“It’s that guy...”

“...?”

Rina frowned before following his gaze.

On the path where they had just walked, a figure was approaching towards them.

Due to the figure walking in a relaxed pace as if he was strolling, the two of them unknowingly let down their guard.

It was a teenage boy who wore a tiny hat on his head as decoration. Aside from his pacing, his clean shirt and tie was completely out-of-place with the river-side scenery.

“He is...?”

“Special Environmental Preservation ---“

Kazufusa’s moan was overlapped by a sudden explosion. A strong gust resulting from the impact blew Rina’ hair into the air.

“What...”

Rina was speechless for a moment.

A big hole was blasted into the ground right front of them. Concrete was crushed and smashed into powder before scattering around.

What in the world had happened?

Did the teenage boy who suddenly appeared do all of this?

Facing the Rina who was dumbfounded by the sudden turn of events, and the Kazufusa who had distorted his expression from fear ---

“I’m from the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. Due to your (Mushi) being unstable, it must be exterminated.”

The teenage boy who was showing a calm smile, Mr. Hat House, deeply bowed.

The existence known as (Mushi), which devours human's dreams, had been concealed by the government from the public.

The organization that they created solely for this, was the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau; An agency that issues trained Mushitsuki to capture or eliminate other Mushitsuki, against whom normal firearms were not very effective against.

And now, in front of Rina appeared a person who claimed to be a member of that Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

A mild-mannered and elegant teenage boy, Mr. Hat House.

"Uu...Ahh..."

Kazufusa suddenly turned pale as his body all stiffened up.

"After all, I have gotten tired of this game of tag. Let us just end it right now."

On top of the smiling boy's head, the decoration-like hat suddenly floated. On its smooth surface, a crack appeared, wriggling like a living creature. Looking through the crack, numerous tiny compound eyes could be seen. In addition, sharp fangs grew on the edge of its bottom open hole.

"Nice to meet you, the young lady over there. I'm Kashu level 6 ranked personnel, (Mr.Hat House). I've been waiting for the chance for him to be left alone... but it seems like you do not have the intention of leaving his side; that's why I will have no choice but to eliminate you as well. I can't leave any witnesses alive after all."

The abnormal hat began to stretch out like a rubber band, becoming bigger and bigger. It opened its mouth, and stabbed its fangs onto the teenage boy's face as if it was biting him.

From another person's perspective, it looked as if he had pulled the black hat all the way down near his lips. In place of his eyes that were covered, the numerous compound eyes on the hat's surface stared at Rina's direction simultaneously.

"Uuaaa!!!"

Kazufusa screamed in panic, before turning around and fleeing.

"Didn't I say, the chase game is already over?---"

Beneath the hat, a smile began to form from the corner of his lips. He picked up a few stones next to his feet, playfully tossing them into the air, and then catching them. On the teenage boy's hands --- beneath

the skin of his hand, numerous black shadows flashed through. Nematode-like insects quickly moved from the tip of his fingers onto the stones.

“I won’t let you escape.”

Holding onto the stones that were infested by the black-colored nematode, the teenage boy threw them at the direction where Kazufusa was running to.

Right after that --- the light resulting from the big explosions blinded both Rina’s and Kazufusa’s vision. The ground where the stones had landed completely disappeared. In place of them were deep huge ditches one after another.

The weirdo who covered the part of his face above his mouth with a hat, slowly walked towards them.

“Shouldn’t you guys have given up by now? Stop making this look more disgraceful than it should.”

“Uuahh...Ahhhh---“

“Kazufusa!”

Rina pulled Kazufusa’s hand, and ran straight towards the sluice.

Stones immediately followed right after, and exploded all around the running duo.

“Ahh...!Uahhh..! I-It’s over... W-We can’t get away from him...!”

“Idiot! We’ve already come this far, and you’re still thinking about giving up?! Get your (Mushi) out now!”

“Uu-Uuu--“

“If this continues, both of us will get killed! Come on!”

In front of Kazufusa, who was moaning as if he had given up on himself, a small centipede jumped onto the ground. The centipede’s body swelled up in an instant like a balloon, and carried Kazufusa and Rina onto its back. The giant centipede carrying the two children, nimbly passed through the explosions with its limbs.

However, due to them being unable to evade the incoming cement fragments and debris resulted from the explosions and gusts, numerous cuts were carved onto their bodies.

“Uaghh! Uu—“

“Listen to me, Kazufusa! If we can’t get away from him, then all there’s left for us to do is fight back!”

“F-Fight back?! T-That is ---“

That’s impossible! ---

Just when Kazufusa was about to shout that line out, Rina suddenly slapped both of his cheeks with her hands. Facing Kazufusa's stunned expression, Rina looked straight at him with a firm gaze:

"Do you want to get killed without even trying to do anything? Or are you telling me that, you dare to hit an ordinary girl who's not even a Mushitsuki, yet you don't even have the courage to stand and fight against a stronger opponent?! This centipede that was birthed from your dream --- is it something so weak that you can't even do that?!"

"...!"

"Tell me! Is that dream you harbored--- something that you can easily give up to an end like this?!"

Just then, Mr.Hat House appeared in front of the duo that was gazing at each other.

"I'll be troubled if this doesn't come to an end, you know?"

The teenage boy who was hiding his face under the hat, forcefully slapped his hand onto the ground. The black-colored nematode immediately jumped out from underneath his skin and dyed the concrete floor into pitch black.

In an instant, the floor in front swelled up --- and then a big explosion happened.

Rina instinctively shut her eyes tightly, yet the impact that she had expected never came –

For the sake of protecting Kazufusa and Rina, the giant centipede coiled its body around them. The hard carapace on its body bounced away the flying debris, thus dividing the force of the explosion into the surroundings.

"Kazufusa---!"

"I don't ---!!"

He clenched his teeth before pausing. To avoid the incoming rubble raining from above, the centipede carried them onto its back and moved swiftly once again.

"I don't want to get killed in such a place...!"

Seeing Kazufusa showing such a desperate expression, Rina could not help but show a shallow smile.

"B-But, how are we going to fight back against such an opponent...?..."

"Listen to me, I have a plan. First, head over to that sluice and then ---"

"Mm, Mhm...Eh? T-That sort of thing, I won't allow it! Rina you're not even a Mushitsuki to begin with...!"

"That doesn't matter!"

Facing the hesitating Kazufusa, Rina continued firmly with a smile:

“We’re doing this together, it doesn’t matter whether I’m a Mushitsuki or not! Or are you trying to say that --- you don’t want to believe in me?”

“....”

“I wish you can believe in me, just like how I’ve always believed in you!”

Kazufusa bit his lip for a moment before nodding as he refocused his gaze at the sluice.

“Of course I do!”

In the meanwhile, the centipede continued to dodge the storming gale caused by the explosions as it slowly accelerated. Moving its countless wriggling legs towards the opposite direction of (Mr.Hat House) --- gliding towards the sluice that was separating the river into two.

“Still intending on running away eh?”

(Mr.Hat House) heaved a sigh, and started chasing after the centipede.

The centipede that endured the impact from the explosions finally arrived in front of the sluice. It hurriedly carried the two kids on its back and climbed the wall vertically. After having to overcome gravity and reaching the top, it pushed over the fence and went straight for the rooftop.

The rooftop of the old sluice had already become very worn-out from many years’ weathering. Even the fence that the centipede just knocked over was covered in rust; the ground overgrown with moss. The hallway designed for electrical panels and the water meter channel were only wide enough for two adults standing shoulder by shoulder.

(Mr.Hat House), who just climbed up the stairs by himself, was then ambushed by the centipede.

“So you guys were intending to ambush me at such a place huh... how naïve...”

Facing the giant centipede that seems as if it was going to crush his skull --- (Mr.Hat House) casually swung his hand outward. It seemed as if he had used some kind of ability; the centipede’s huge body was instantly knocked back as if it was reflected by a rubber band.

But, ---

“Right now, Rina!”

With Kazufusa’s voice as signal, Rina came out from hiding behind the electrical panel and tackled (Mr.Hat House)’s legs, who was focusing his attention on the centipede in the moment.

“What---!”

(Mr.Hat House)’s surprised shout, was erased by the gale.

Without the slightest hesitation, Rina leaped into the air together with (Mr.Hat House).

Through the fence that the centipede had knocked over, both Rina and (Mr.Hat House) fell towards the ground at the same time.

“----“

The fierce wind that was blowing against her face, and the sense of liberation from gravity which embraced her, the Rina whom was free falling in the air recalled of the memories that happened a few days ago. The feeling that she had when she jumped down from the roof with her childhood acquaintance, a silent pleasure that was exactly the same compared to what she was feeling right now.

Since that time, she began to have this thought ---

If she had just thrown away everything, and flew to somewhere distant --- then she would be free.

As long as she continued to fly towards that endless horizon ---

One day, she would definitely ---

“...!”

While sinking into the pleasure of free falling, Rina’s body suddenly stopped moving in midair.

The reason for that was because the centipede had caught Rina with its body. It stretched its thick body like a bridge hooked onto the sluice’s gate, and caught the falling Rina in a nick of time

“Wooahhh!”

On the other hand, (Mr.Hat House) fell hard into the river. Due to the sluice being closed, the cement bed of the reduced-current river could be seen.

Rina and Kazufusa furrowed their faces simultaneously when they saw (Mr.Hat House) fall onto the cement river bed with such force.

The assassin of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau did not move at all after that. His body followed the shallow stream, and started floating along.

“W-We...did it?...”

Right when Rina had come back onto the rooftop, Kazufasa was standing with a stunned expression of disbelief. His eyes were gazing at the body of (Mr.Hat House) who slowly floated downstream.

“R-Really...? Did...we really win...?”

“Yup! We did it!”

Rina showed a bright smile, Kazufusa seemed to have also finally felt relieved.

“Ah-Aha! Wooo! We won---!”

“See?! Didn’t I tell you, we can definitely do it!”

“M-Mhm!”

The two of them immersed themselves in the joy of a great victory, and celebrated for quite a while on the sluice’s rooftop.

After laughing till exhaustion, the two of them sat down back to back against each other, indulging in the after breeze of a complete victory.

“I-I still can’t believe it, the fact that we defeated such a terrifying opponent...”

“No matter what kind of enemy comes in our way down the road, we will definitely win! Because we are strong!”

“.....Mm.”

“Even though we are just kids right now, as we grow... and become adults, we will become even stronger.”

“Mm...Mmm.”

Hearing the excited voice replying from behind, Rina slowly shifted her gaze down at the floor.

Her chest was aching as if it was being strangled tightly.

“You think --- you can escape on your own from now on?...”

Looking back down at the ground that was blasted into a mess from the explosions, numerous cars could be seen driving in their direction.

“Eh?...W-What’s up with those cars?! SEPB again?!”

“No, it seems like they’re here for me.”

Rina bit her lips after replying.

No matter where they go.

No matter where it leads them, she wants to keep on running.

The feelings she held when she spoke those words, were definitely her real wishes.

But --- at the same time, she knew that it was something that will never come true.

There was no way that she could escape under her father’s eyes.

Needless to mention police, the fact that even the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau this kind of secret government agency was under his influence --- She had already expected it.

No, other than that, there was one more reason as to why Rina could never escape.

And that --- was the existence of her mother.

“I’m going home.”

Rina stood up, and brushed away the dirt on her waist. Kazufusa stood up along with her, gazing at Rina while making mumbling noises as if he wanted to say something.

“Someone is waiting for me, that’s why I can’t leave that person behind and just go...”

The fact that she couldn’t bring herself to leave her mother behind --- she was already well aware of it since the beginning.

During the past few days she was absent from home, she hoped that her mother made up her mind to separate from her father.

Seeing the Rina who showed a bright smile to cheer him up, Kazufusa bit his lips as if he was feeling reluctant to part ways. But soon, he raised his head with an expression filled with determination and smiled:

“Thank you, Rina..... Because you were with me, I ...”

“Even though I don’t know when can we meet again, you have to fight on! Don’t lose!”

“...Mm!”

The Mushitsuki boy that was saved because of Rina, showed his brightest smile ever.

Right after Rina sat into the car, the sound of the door closing next to her came.

The luxury car carrying Rina quietly left the sluice she was just at.

“.....”

Turning her head to look at the sluice, she could see a figure of a boy standing on the rooftop, watching her getting further away. In order to make things more complicated than it is, Rina told Kazufusa to momentarily hide over there.

When they were bidding farewell, Hibino Kazufusa showed a smile --- the terrified expression that she had seen before was now nowhere to be found.

With this, Rina had saved another person.

And this time, it was a Mushitsuki.

In addition, she had saved “two people” at once.

Her heart was filled with a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction.

The two who have now obtained their freedom, they would definitely be able to continue their escape.

No matter where they go.

No matter where it leads them.

This made Rina feel happier than ever.

“Master has taken a break from work, and already came home.”

Even after hearing the driver’s sudden line, Rina still put up a smile.

She had already saved them, there’s nothing that could change that.

But ---

Just thinking about the fact that she would soon return to her enraged father’s side, Rina subconsciously tightened her fists.

Even though she had already prepared for this when she made her decision to run away ---

Even so, she could feel her heart gradually sinking, while slowly being dyed into pitch black.

“....”

Wearing a mask-like smile on her face, Rina once again returned to the tiny birdcage.

2.00

A Hatter

From what he had heard, the name of the observatory tower that was standing amidst the streets of Akamaki City seemed to be called Skypia.

Before the construction was completed, he had passed by this place quite a few times occasionally. It wasn't until a few days after the construction was finished and they started decorating the tower with colorful lighting in preparation of the opening ceremony that he started paying more attention to it.

Although he had drifted here due to some circumstances, he--- (Mr.Hat House) still thinks he likes this city, Akamaki City.

After all, this city was known as one of the few large cities within the country that had everything you ever wanted; ever dreamed of, and the streets were filled with people and high-rising buildings. This place was a very suitable environment for someone as eye-catching as him to blend in.

Even a simple stroll out here would never make him feel bored.

Stopping at the grand crossroad right in front of the Akamaki train station, he wandered aimlessly.

"Hey---!"

At a place not far from him, a few girls that looked like elementary students were waving their hands at him.

"Didn't you say you were going to play soccer at the school?"

It seemed they were talking to some friends, but around (Mr.Hat House), no one was replying back to them.

"What's up with him! Why's he ignoring us?!"

The girls became angry all of sudden.

He stood there in a daze, gazing at the passing by pedestrians silently.

"I've been slacking off and dragging my mission as long as possible. When I first came to this area which was under the Central Headquarters' jurisdiction, I thought I'd made a terrible mistake... but this place is actually quite nice, I wonder if he will be staying here a bit longer....."

Talking to himself had already become one of his habits.

After tiring of surveying pedestrians, (Mr.Hat House) once again wandered off aimlessly, and left the train station.

“Come to think of it, he does look pretty worn-out, probably near his limits already? I wonder what happened to him...”

Walking down from a flyover, he blended into the crowd.

But just when he walked pass by a building’s window, he noticed the decoration he was wearing on his hat was crooked through the reflection. He quickly fixed the hat-shaped ornament and his shirt collar as well. Despite being only seventeen years old, his looks and way of speech were very mature, they were traits that he couldn’t change no matter what.

Feeling kind of thirsty, he then began to search for a nearby café.

“I guess I should just leave him alone for now. But if other personnel found him in the meanwhile then it would be troublesome, someone like him wouldn’t be able to survive more than a few hits from the Central Headquarters’ combatants. If that were to happen, my mission would be over, and I will have to go back to West Central Division... What a pain in the neck...”

He muttered quietly while searching for his café.

“If I were to transfer to the Central Headquarters, then shouldn’t I be able to stay in this city as long as I want? But over here, it seemed like things weren’t that easy either, I can feel the tension all the way from here. I’m pretty accurate when it comes to these sorts of things after all, tough choices...”

“Welcome, Ojou-sama!”

... It seemed like he entered the wrong shop.

No, it should be right. Even though the employees were all wearing some sort of cosplay from animation, it was still a café nonetheless.

“Are you alone by yourself? Let me show you the way to your table.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Becoming very polite when talking to someone was also one of his habits.

He was lead to his table, and then ordered some drink.

“Umm, the Central Headquarters... and the West Central Division...Eh? Wait, what was I thinking about before? --- Ah forget it, it doesn’t matter anyway.”

Just looking at the employee’s cute and refreshing outfits brought a smile on his face.

Even though he walked into this shop by mistake, he doesn’t really dislike this kind of interest, he was rather fond of it. The reason why his comrades often said “Despite your appearance and way of speech, you’re actually a laity through and through” was probably because of this.

After sitting there for a whole three hours, but only ordering a cup of coffee, he finally checked out with a satisfied smile on his face.

“You girls are really cute~”

“Eh? Ah, t-thank you...”

Upon hearing that line, the staff that was doing the cashier jerked up all of sudden.

Ops, I just spoke it out of my mind without thinking! Does she think I’m disgusting?

He hurriedly left the shop in embarrassment.

“You’re much more beautiful than us...”

One of the maids spoke that line to someone in his direction right before he left.

After that, he decided to continue his stroll.

“Oh shoot, the movie that I was planning on watching today got taken down yesterday, darn it.”

Through the reflection of the glass holding the movie’s schedule, he could see his disappointed expression being reflected on it. He stretched his hand and fixed the ornament on his head, before fixing his necktie as well.

“Can’t help it, I guess I’ll pick something else... Wait no, I should go to the bookstore and check their synopsis first. Since I can’t watch the one I really want to see right now, it would really suck if I were to pick one that I don’t like.”

And if there weren’t any movie that interests me, I guess I can go to the game center.

Or maybe take a few drinks? Borrow a car and driving around sounds good too. The fact that the Ferris wheel that really interested me ever since I came here is still incomplete is quite a disappointment.

“Bookstore, bookstore.....”

His lifestyle had always been like this; it was not after he came to Akamaki City that he just started becoming like this.

He really liked to enjoy things by himself.

Not caring about anyone else, not having to do what other people say, doing whatever he wants.

He felt that the he, who could do these , was happier than anyone else.

“Hey!”

While he was walking on the sidewalk, an unknown man wearing a suit came waving at him.

“Are you going home right now? Wanna hang out?”

He nonchalantly looked around, and noticed that there were many people walking past him. He was in the middle of a busy crossroad. He then slightly lowered his head and replied:

“I’m sorry. I’m a bit in a hurry right now.”

“I-Is that so. U-Uhmm, ah, are you interested in this sort of thing? If you do, you can ---“

“Ah, yes I do. Can I take one?”

“O-Of course! This starts tomorrow night, if you’re free ---“

“Thank you.”

The object he received from the man was a free coupon ticket for an all-you-can-eat buffet. Having obtained a coupon out of the blue made him really happy, but as soon as he found out that it required a couple to participate he was rather disappointed. To the (Mr. Hat House) who always liked to enjoy things by himself, there was no way he could find a partner to participate. The hand he reached into his pocket crumbled the coupon into a ball.

Nonetheless, he really liked this city.

He never got bored playing by himself.

As long as he could keep track of his target’s movement, he could keep on enjoying his freedom as much as he wants.

There was only thing that he worried about, and that --- was about a frightful enemy hidden somewhere in this city.

But that has nothing to do with him, after all, this Akamaki City was under the Central Headquarters’ jurisdiction, he who belongs to the West Central Division doesn’t need to get himself involved.

“Ah..... What was I just thinking about again?”

His alias was (Mr. Hat House), a Kashu level six ranked personnel who belonged to the West Central Division of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. His mission was to capture newborn Mushitsuki, or eliminate them if he suspected them to be dangerous to the public.

Right now, he was supposed to be in the middle of his mission. He followed an escaped Mushitsuki all the way to this Akamaki City.

“Ah, that’s right. Bookstore, where is the bookstore again...?”

The target’s name was Hibino Kazufusa.

A cowardly elementary school boy who was possessed by an unstable centipede.

The Others

Even though (Mr. Hat House) was fully enjoying his free time, he still hadn't forgotten about his mission.

"...It seems like he's obediently staying in that warehouse for the time being."

He stood on the streets as the night was gradually falling, while concentrating to make sure that there were no signs of any other (Mushi) around him.

"I really hope he can stay hidden like this forever. That way I can continue this fun new life of mine as well."

Yesterday night, he suddenly felt a (Mushi)'s response. After tracking it down and arriving at the scene, he noticed that his target Hibino Kazufusa had released his centipede in front of a woman.

---"N-No, don't come closer...!"

---"What a disgusting creature. Rest assured I don't have the slightest interest in Mushitsuki."

After the woman finished that line with a cold tone, she told him about a warehouse that was far from the city center. Judging from the content of their conversation, it seemed like the woman noticed the running Kazufusa and decided to help him out --- *If that was the case, shouldn't that woman's tone be more caring and enthusiastic?*

The woman left very quickly after that, while on the other hand Kazufusa went for the warehouse half in doubt. After buying food and daily supplies, he hid in there and hasn't come out since then.

"That woman who helped the centipede boy... I guess I can leave her alone. It was within my expectations for someone unrelated to show kindness to him. In fact, I actually want to thank her for doing that."

After all, no one usually goes to that warehouse; it was a very safe place to hide. Kazufusa probably would stay in there as much as he can.

He didn't need to kill off this target, but he won't let him go as well. He just needed to know his whereabouts and movements.

If this were to continue, the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau would not give him a new mission. He would then be able to stay and have fun in this city as long as he wanted while pretending to be tracking the target.

"With this, I should be able to stay in this city and play a little longer now, wonderful."

As long as he could play freely, he was satisfied. There was obviously no sign of any loyalty from him to the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

Even during the time when a monster-level Mushitsuki called (Fuyuhotaru) first appeared, he was doing the exact same thing just like now, dragging a pointless mission on and on. It was because he knew that if he didn't do so, he would definitely get summoned back to the unified squad that was set to eliminate (Fuyuhotaru) --- and get wiped out along with the rest of them. Even he thoroughly understood the fact that someone like him could never be able to take on an Ishi level one ranked monster who could destroy a part of a city with just a swing of its hand in an instant.

As a result of the incident regarding (Fuyuhotaru), the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau had suffered a great loss of ranked combatants and as such, began to have difficulties controlling and capturing the newborn Mushitsuki. From what he had expected --- there should be a period where a large amount of Mushitsuki would be birthed.

And judging from the current lack of personnel situation, a weak Mushitsuki like Hibino Kazufusa shouldn't be noticed by SEPB's combatants other than him.

"And the other matter which worries me seems to be stationary at the moment."

The only "enemy" he was aware of, was silent as usual. He would occasionally go and check out the situation, but it seemed like the other party didn't have the intention of creating a fuss as well. He just hoped that the Central Headquarters could notice this faster and get rid of it once and for all.

"Ahhh, if only the SEPB could forget about my existence~~~"

Of course, that would be impossible. After (Mr. Hat House) heaved a long sigh, he noticed a girl was running towards his direction.

The gorgeous teenage girl stopped her steps in front of him.

"...Good evening."

"Good evening to you too, young lady. Please immediately turn around, and head straight home."

Seeing the girl didn't have the slightest intention of leaving, he continued to try to persuade her with his polite tone.

"It's very dangerous to stroll around at night, let alone talking to strangers. You should hurry home before you're swallowed whole by the monster pretending to be a puppet. If you're lost, then I shall take your hand and walk you home."

"I have to go somewhere right now, that's why I can't go home yet."

"Is that so? If that's the case, then head straight there, don't wander off to elsewhere."

"Who are you? Are you also lost?"

He twitched his brow for a moment from surprise.

"What makes you think I'm lost?"

"Aren't you walking back and forth on the streets since a few days ago?"

Oops.

One of his abilities that he kept secret from the SEPB, was to erase his existence from people's consciousness, while the other one was being able to detect (Mushi)'s presence. If the SEPB were to find out he had such abilities, no doubt they would appoint him as a higher rank and give him much harder and troublesome missions.

In order to make people forget his presence, he frequently used this ability.

But never did he expect that it would not work. The girl in front of him had almost completely recognized him.

"And also --- your expression looked like you needed help."

"...!"

In that instant, (Mr. Hat House) widened his eyes from shock.

It was much more shocking than the time when he was first recognized, he could even feel his heart jumping out from his chest.

The reason why he was so shocked, was probably because --- what she said was right.

I'm happy ---

He had always been lying to himself with that.

"Is that so, do I really have that kind of expression eh?"

He felt like he was about to tear up from the sudden confession.

Why was he this easy to see through?

Until now, no one had ever been able to notice his pain, even in the SEPB, no one could hear the moan of his heart.

The two of them stood there and chatted for a while.

"How could you tell?"

"It just came naturally --- By the way, I'm Tachibana Rina."

"You can call me, (Mr. Hat House)."

"That's a cute name, so why are you showing such a sorrowful expression?"

"Because my wish can't be fulfilled..."

"Your wish?"

"Yeah, I wish to be alone."

"But wouldn't you feel lonely if you were alone?"

"To me, solitude means freedom, and other people are nothing but restraints."

"And those restraints are so strong that I couldn't escape even if I wanted to ... I wish to travel freely to every part of this world without any restraints or bindings. But right now I'm currently collared by an organization, acting like a silly watch dog that was let loose despite being chained unknowingly."

"..."

"..."

"Is there really no way to do it?"

"This problem is difficult to solve. Although it sounded a bit contradictory, it's impossible for one to do it alone..."

"Then I'll help you!"

"...Really?"

"Ah, but I got to do something else first, after I finished with that then I will help you!"

Rina smiled, causing (Mr. Hat House) to smile right after her.

We most likely won't meet again. He said that line in his heart.

Of course, he wouldn't think a small girl like her would be able to do anything for him, but even so he still felt as if he was saved.

Even if it was just some comforting words, but the moment when the girl said she would help him it made him really happy.

"Goodnight, Mr. Hat House."

"Mhm, Good bye."

After bidding farewell to the girl, (Mr. Hat House) remained where he stood for a while.

It might be because of the fact that the other party was just a small girl, a passerby who has no connection what so ever to the world he was in, that he was able to frankly reveal everything stuffed

inside of him. Never did he expect that it would have such an effect on him, his chest became lighter and it became easier for him to breathe all of sudden.

“What an incredible little girl she is! This is so unlike me to actually vent it all out to a stranger I just met!”

After immersing himself in the laughter for a while, right when (Mr. Hat House) turned around and was about to go back, he suddenly jerked his head up.

“This...”Distortion” I’m feeling right now... it must be that centipede boy’s, what happened to him?”

Feeling the sudden presence of a (Mushi), He hurriedly rushed to the outskirts of the city, and observed the warehouse from a building across from it.

“---What’s going on?”

Hibino Kazufusa was in the warehouse just like yesterday, that didn’t change, but there was a new figure in there along with him.

It was the little girl that he just met back at the streets, Rina.

“Why is she together with Hibino Kazufusa...?”

However, there was no time for him to calmly analyze the situation.

Despite putting up a hesitated expression, Kazufusa put away his centipede and walked out of the warehouse after the smiling Rina.

“What? What just happened? What the hell is this?!”

He, who couldn’t understand the situation, began to vent in a low voice.

The only thing he understood right away --- was the fact that he, (Mr. Hat House), could no longer stay in this city anymore.

On the same day, Hibino Kazufusa and Tachibana Rina escaped Akamaki City together.

Why did they meet up and run away together? ---

The (Mr. Hat House), who couldn’t figure out the reason to their escape, could only follow them from behind.

No matter how hard and fast they walked, there was only so much distance two elementary school students could pull off in a day, hence it was easy to monitor them. The only thing that was bothering him quite a bit was the fact that he couldn’t solve the question of his mind.

And most importantly, about the city he was very fond of. He was quite disappointed that he had to leave so fast.

The only consolation he had was the fact that he no longer needed to be afraid of the “frightful enemy” hidden in Akamaki City. However --- the target’s sudden action really puzzled him.

“It seemed like they do not intend on using transportation. That girl also seems to be avoiding something...”

The two of them followed the river and slowly walked forward.

Due to their slow pace, (Mr. Hat House) who was following behind them had to slow down as well, just so that he doesn’t get ahead of them. To accommodate the Kazufusa who was already shaky from fatigue, their speed was more like that of ants.

(Mr. Hat House) maintained a certain distance, and continued following.

And then, the third day’s dawn arrived.

He noticed a tiny figure sneaked out of the hut quietly, it was Rina.

Rina followed along the misty river side and then walked down from the riverbank. It seemed like she left Kazufusa alone in the hut.

“...?”

Where is she going? --- That question was very soon solved.

Rina’s destination was the residential area built near the riverside. In addition, she was walking straight towards his direction.

“The guy from the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, you should be around here right?”

Great, what should I do now...?

The (Mr. Hat House) who was taking a nap in the shadows of a residential building began to ponder his next action.

And he found the answer immediately.

“We call our organization SEPB for short; it is really wordy to call it as it is.”

When Rina saw him walked out from the shadows, she immediately widened her eyes, but very soon she put up a smile instead.

“So it was (Mr. Hat House)-san huh.”

“Were you shocked? It doesn’t seem that surprised to you though.”

“Well, I came across both Kazufusa and you around the same time, so it was pretty understandable.”

“Did you notice my following?”

“Hehe, my sixth sense is pretty sharp.”

“It does seem that way. Putting that aside, I’m rather surprised.”

The fact that he was noticed by an elementary school kid didn’t really put him into much shame.

After all, he could feel the atmosphere of wisdom coming from this girl in front, she probably had a high level of education.

The reason why he showed himself was also because of this.

Despite being such a young age, he could tell that Rina was very smart. That was why he felt he should just show himself and give her a warning, making her leave on her own, rather than hiding in the shadows and continue monitoring.

(Mr. Hat House) and Rina each stood on the one end of the foggy residential street, gazing at each other.

“I’m from the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, it’s my mission to eliminate the unstable (Mushi) infested on Hibino Kazufusa.”

“I heard that once a (Mushi) is killed, its host would turn into an emotionless corpse, Fallen, and would lose all their memories?”

“You’re right --- So why are you together with Hibino Kazufusa mm?”

“Because it seemed like he was really in trouble, that’s why I decided to help him.”

“... How should I put it, I thought there was a really complicated reason behind it; never did I expect it could be explained in just one line, to be honest I’m really shocked.”

“Eh? You’re shocked? Really?”

“Although I might look like this, I’m really shocked within. --- It seems like I’ve misjudged you, I thought you’d be a smarter girl. To think that you went out of your way and helped a cornered Mushitsuki just because you felt like it, you must really have a death wish.”

“Hehe, Kazufusa also said I’m an idiot sometime --- But I was thinking, since the guy after him hasn’t attacked yet, there should still be room for negotiation.”

Facing the Rina who held her head high as she said that, (Mr. Hat House) could not help but feel a shudder.

It seemed like the girl in front of him was even intending on bargaining with the enemy. If one were to ask how he had misjudged her, he could only reply that she was much more shrewd than he thought she would be.

“This is my last warning to you, hurry up and go home at once, or else ---”

“You’ve been using Kazufusa to maintain your “freedom”, haven’t you?”

“...!”

(Mr. Hat house) was instantly stunned dumbfounded.

He was originally intending on attacking with words first, never did he expect a sharp counter, not to mention it was a powerful and straight right punch that knocked his jaw open. She had taken complete advantage of the “weakness” that he had told her in heat of the moment before.

“I was feeling strange about it right from the start. Because Kazufusa said that the enemy was very powerful, yet he continued to escape from this powerful enemy again and again. Doesn’t that sound contradictory to you?”

“.....”

“The “Collar” you’ve mentioned, it was the SEPB right? You wanted to escape from the SEPB, and to be free.”

“.....”

Facing Rina, who had already realized the truth, for the first time ever, (Mr. Hat House) felt fear.

He slowly raised his right hand as he called out his (Mushi), a black-colored nematode appeared underneath his skin, wriggling for its chance as he approached the girl.

This girl is way too dangerous.

In regards to how she’s being dangerous, he couldn’t answer right away --- But from the experiences that he had earned so far by fighting with his life on the line, he could feel it instantly, not to mention he was very sensitive to danger.

Even though right now, she’s just an ordinary human, a weak child.

But after she grows up into an adult --- she would definitely become unstoppable.

That’s right, if she doesn’t self-destruct; no one would be able to stop her ---

“Thank goodness!”

Rina showed a bright smile, and froze (Mr. Hat House) right on the spot, not moving.

He, who hoped to live alone by himself, disliked being interfered with by others, was mysteriously --- fascinated by that beautiful smile.

“If that’s the case, then I can help you!”

“Huh...?”

And then, Rina told him the “plan” that she came up with.

Unable to move, (Mr. Hat House) who was rooted to the ground could only listen until she finished ----

“So? What do you think? You think it will work?”

What a naïve idea.

What a superficial plan.

But it was this childish play-like “plan” which saved him.

“Aha, hahaha...”

His throat was making hoarse laughter.

“C-Can...I...really obtain true freedom with this...?”

(Mr. Hat House) gazed at Rina with his wet eyes ---

“Of course, with us together we should be able to do it!”

Rina proudly lifted her V-shaped hand gesture.

And so, the “plan” that Rina came up with was put into action.

“---Uwahhhh!!”

(Mr. Hat House) was pushed down from the sluice by the girl, falling straight downwards.

Rina, who was then saved by the centipede in a nick of time, secretly made a V-shaped gesture at him.

--- “Goodbye, (Mr. Hat House)-san.”

Her lips silently whispered that line.

The instant right before he fell straight into the river, he also secretly showed a smile at Rina.

“Uwahh!”

He then immediately used his ability to completely absorb the impact of the fall as he bounced on the cement bed. His ability really comes in handy at times like this.

He pretended to be knocked out, rolling along the shallow shore of the river and then floated downstream.

He sneakily opened his eyes to look above the sluice, only to see Rina and Kazufusa high-fiving each other, celebrating.

The “plan” that Rina came up with was so simple that it was surprising.

First, (Mr. Hat House) needs to attack Kazufusa, and then pretend that he was defeated --- it was as simple as that.

(Mr. Hat House) was carrying out his mission to capture a rogue Mushitsuki, but was defeated and killed from the counter-attack --- he just had to make the SEPB think that way.

And even if the SEPB were suspicious of this report and sent out assassins after him, he might easily be found out if it was during the time when he’d just become a Mushitsuki, but right now after he had already gained so much experience and skills, it should not be a problem to get away from them.

In the meanwhile, if the SEPB were to capture Kazufusa, it would make it so much easier for him. Kazufusa thought that he had already defeated him, that’s why his testimony would make his “death” even more solid to the SEPB.

Originally Rina was betting on the chance that he won’t get caught. Her purpose of doing this was probably to give that weak Mushitsuki a bit more confidence and courage.

Even if (Mr. Hat House) were to make this suggestion to Kazufusa right from the start, it wouldn’t have worked out then.

The weak Kazufusa would definitely get caught by members other than him, and after interrogation he would definitely confess the fact that he was playing dead. That way he would have to live in the fear of being targeted by the SEPB for the rest of his life.

“Aha....Ahaahahhh.”

After being washed away by the river far away, He finally couldn’t hold back the laughter that was about to burst from within.

He propped himself up on the river bank, before standing up.

It was as if the world that he saw through his wet eyes was completely different compared to the world that he saw yesterday.

“Free... I’m free...I-I’m finally...!”

Never in his wildest dreams had he thought that such a childish plan could open up the door to the freedom he had been endlessly searching for. In fact, during the fight against Kazufusa, he was so nervous and excited that he had messed up his acting quite a bit.

“T-Thank you... Thank you...”

Towards the girl known as Tachibana Rina, he felt grateful and thankful to her from the bottom of his heart.

“At last, I-I finally... obtained freedom...!”

On the face of (Mr. Hat House) that was shining in the warming sunset, tears began to pour down. But suddenly, a weak melody rang against his ears.

A relaxing and calm melody which came from a music box.

“...!”

(Mr. Hat House) instantly widened his eyes, and turned his head around.

Only to find a shadow was walking closer in his direction with its back facing the great sunset.

Awkward and unnatural movements --- but the speed at which it was approaching was insanely fast.

“W-Why---!”

Due to him was just immersing himself in the joy of freedom; his mind hadn’t completely adjusted to this new turn of events.

Through the reflection of (Mr. Hat House)’s stunned eyes, a petite figure wrapped in a cloak could be seen.

From the stick-like object that was floating above it --- from the slender (Mushi), numerous string of silk that were released from it were hanging a pale-faced puppet.

He knew that the children called this disgusting puppet “Rokko”.

In addition, he had also been carefully surveying this “frightful enemy”; there’s no way he would have mistaken her as someone else.

“Was she following me all along--?!?”

As the melody of the music box suddenly increased, the string-puppet suddenly pulled in closer.

He immediately called out his (Mushi), black-colored nematodes, from both hands, but he was slower by a beat. Rokko, who leaped at him from above, knocked away both of his arms and then ---

“Ugh—!”

Fwoosh

The hand of the listless puppet pierced through the chest of (Mr. Hat House), who had just been rejoicing a moment ago from his joy of being free.

She couldn't remember clearly what happened after she finally came home from running away for the past few days.

The only thing she could remember was her furious father, and her mother who was crying while hugging her tightly.

Her father's shouting was just too overwhelmingly loud that she couldn't even understand what he was shouting about half of the time. Even her mother faced his physical abuse.

But even so, her mother was still desperately trying to protect Rina. However, right after she suddenly coughed, she collapsed out of the blue. This made Rina very worried. *Maybe she isn't feeling okay somewhere?*

Meanwhile, her father continued to interrogate Rina, but Rina refused to even reply with a single word, and just glared at him silently.

And as a result, she was punished mercilessly. She had lost count of how many times she was beaten. It wasn't until the commotion had alerted the neighbors and police, making them come to stop him that he finally calmed down.

He then left the scene along with some men that seemed to be related to the police. In addition, there well-dressed men with sharp looks; they're probably SEPB's people. The scandal of his daughter running away from home must have been a huge impact on his image. He must have used money and his authority to completely hide this from the public.

"Mom, are you okay?..."

When Rina opened her mouth to call out to her mother, she saw her pressing her chest rather than other places where she'd been hit, and slowly lifting herself up.

"Rina... are you hurt anywhere? I was really worried about you..."

Even now, her mother was still worrying about Rina's safety rather than herself.

"If even you were to disappear from my side... I wouldn't know what else to do... I only have you left..."

Rina looked at the mother that was hugging her tightly. Right now, she could fully understand her feelings, no --- since long ago, she was already aware of it.

Like many others, her mother was also waiting to be saved. She knew that Rina was the only one who could salvage her from this bottomless hell, that's why she had been desperately protecting her.

"I'm fine... Sorry for making you worried, mom."

Upon seeing Rina's sincere apologetic smile, her mother seemed relieved. After sending her mother who didn't seem too well to her room, Rina returned to her bedroom.

"....."

Right after she entered the room, she fell right onto her bed, and buried her face into the teddy bear that her mother gave her.

She was a bit disappointed regarding the fact that her mother had not made up her mind to be separated from her father.

Even if Rina hadn't come back, she would probably stay here and wait forever.

Nothing had changed.

This birdcage encaging Rina hadn't change the slightest ever since she left ---

It took a while for her to calm down and clear her thoughts.

Just when she was finally able to think clearly again, her bedroom's door opened.

"Rina-san."

It was Mikajima's voice.

"I've already told you not to get yourself involved with the Mushitsuki, why did you still ---"

When Rina lifted herself up and turned around, she saw her private tutor was looking straight at her with a pale face.

"W-W-W-What happened to you?!!!!"

On seeing Rina covered with dirt and injuries all over her body, the private tutor began trembling nonstop.

"Ah, these? Hehe, they are my medal of honor! Though some of them were from the beating I got from that scum father."

"U-Unbelievable... The once beautiful and glorious Rina-san has..."

"Hey listen to this, I saved the Mushitsuki! And it was two people at once!"

"P-Please don't come closer!"

"Come on, why are you giving me that look! Listen to me~"

“Uuu...! P-Please stop! Ohh god, such tragedy ... What have I done to deserve this... This is just too cruel... Why do you have to take Rina-san away from me...I can't take this anymore..”

“You looking for Rina? I'm over here, can't you see? Oyohooo, this way please!”

“This must be a filthy devil's trap to deliberately deprave my eyes.... Hurry and give me back my Rina-san!!”

Looking at the scene of Mikajima who had already huddled into a ball and begun crying like a baby in the corner, Rina could only sigh helplessly.

Turning back to look through the window behind her, she saw that the bright sunset was floating in midair.

Until yesterday, she had been watching this sunset, which hanged amidst the endless sky, while drowning herself in drawing.

“Ah, it's Rokko! Did she just come back from somewhere...? Mikajima, was she not in the park until now?”

“Well... she was there, or not... does it really matter...”

After Mikajima snappily replied, she finally stood up while still shaking.

“I'm thinking of taking a break. We probably won't see each other ever again. Please take good care of yourself.”

“Mikajima, Rokko seems kind of hungry. Can you take some food to her?”

“Why can't YOU do it?”

Mikajima replied coldly, before Rina pulled her sleeve lightly.

“Come on, this is the last time, please?”

“What --- in the world are you doing?”

Mikajima turned around, frowning.

“Lowering your status, jumping into misery for others, even going as far as dirtying that glorious figure of yours... Why are you going as far as doing all of these for the sake of helping others?”

On hearing her question, Rina was speechless for a moment.

She could feel who were looking for help, and that's why she helped them. As a human, it was a very natural behavior.

Why could she feel those people who were looking for salvation's desires then ---?

That answer, she was starting to vaguely understand it.

“Please~? I beg you, Mikajima.”

Rina showed a shallow smile, and continued pleading. Mikajima sighed upon seeing this.

“Fine, let this be the last task I’ll do for you.”

The private tutor unhappily frowned and then walked out of the room.

Meanwhile, Rina turned to look at the scene outside of the window; she could see that Rokko was dancing in the deserted park all alone.

If she were to walk closer, she should be able to hear that melody of the music box that Rokko was dancing to.

Raising her head to look into the far distance, she could then clearly see the river that she walked together with Kazufusa.

The river’s curve stretched into the distance.

Connecting, stretching even further beyond.

She had originally intended on escaping into that far distance, but never did she expect it would only take a few hours for her to be sent home via car.

Rina clenched her lips tightly.

Hibino Kazufusa and (Mr. Hat House) had both obtained freedom.

Rina saved them.

But, she herself --- was unable escape from this rugged and tiny birdcage on her own.

“.....”

In order to not forget this very scene that she was looking at from this room, she took out her notebook.

Her pencil flew and danced on the paper, drawing down the breath-taking scene she could see through her eyes.

The burning bright sun she had been gazing at slowly began to create ripples one after another within her heart.

Someday.

Someday, I can definitely ---

As long as Rina continued to pray strongly for it, it didn’t matter how many or who she had to save.

She could hear the moaning of those who seek salvation.

The same moaning that she has from her heart, she could clearly feel that resonance.

“Someday, I will definitely be able to ... ---”

The tiny hand that was depicting the scene she could see through the tiny window, clenched the pencil even harder.

3.00

A Puppeteer

In a park somewhere amidst the streets of Akamaki City, Rokko was dancing.

The “Eyesore” that had always been bothering her was finally removed.

Ever since the first time she saw him on the streets, she already found that man to be a bother.

That man also seemed to have regarded her as a dangerous target since long ago. During the time he was frequently surveying her, Rokko was also planning on taking him out once and for all one day.

The organization known as the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, Rokko was already aware of since long ago. But that man’s defense was just too tight, it was very difficult to find any opening --- It wasn’t until that moment when he suddenly burst into laughter and tears for no reason, Rokko was finally able to put her assassination into action. Right now, he must be laughing wholeheartedly in the bottom of hell.

“Hey mom, look! It’s a puppet!”

“Ala, so she’s back now huh, I thought she had disappeared.”

Accompanied by the melody of the music box, Rokko continued to dance.

Day and night, without taking a break or a meal, she continued to dance and perform.

Her surrounding was always filled with spectators. Needless to mention of the neighbors that frequently past by this area, even the children that lived far away from here always came here to watch along with their parents or teachers.

Tossing balls and hand-standing on a big ball were children’s favorite tricks. Every time she did those tricks, the children would light up their tiny eyes and begin to smile.

"Children are my food --- I'm going to eat them all, not leaving even one --- Guru Guru, biting from the head downward--- come, come here closer ---"

However, the dance she did while signing this song wasn’t quite that popular. Every time when she tried to move closer with that set of unnatural movements, at least one of the children would start to have a face close to tears. Even though marionette dancing was her best specialty, she was really disappointed by this.

Her popularity had even caused the TV news team to come interview her before, and it was also quite popular among the couples. Many adults were generous enough to always pay for her performance through the empty cans that were left on the ground.

However, Rokko still loved to be watched by the children instead.

After all, they were her only source of energy; only children could fulfill that hungry stomach of her.

“Children are my food --- I'm going to eat them all, not leaving even one ---“

Pedestrians continued to pass by the dancing Rokko, occasionally someone would stop to clap for her performance, or leave some change in her tiny can.

Once night arrived, the tall tower in the distance would be glistening with numerous lightings. Judging from the contents of the dialogues from the parents who brought their children to the park, that place would be open to the public really soon. It was when she started to feel that she needed to polish her skills and tricks even more, so that her costumers wouldn't be snatched away by that thing that doesn't even know how to a backflip.

Although Skypia was very beautiful, the night streets were getting sparse in contrast. Even after the pedestrians were getting fewer and fewer, Rokko continued to dance alone.

“Guru Guru, biting from the head downward--- come, come here closer ---“

The reason for that was because there was still an audience left.

In a three-four building near the park, a girl would always quietly watch Rokko dance.

In addition, a woman who claimed to be her private tutor would sometime come and bring Rokko some food.

“You're really something, you know? To be able to repeat this boring cycle day after day and not feel bored by it, that's really something.”

One day, the private tutor was having a really bad mood out of the blue. Maybe something bad happened to her? When she showed up she just threw the food at Rokko directly.

“This will be the last time I'm doing this. But you don't have to thank me, I didn't do it for your sake.”

Ignoring her, Rokko continued to dance to the melody of the music box.

“Ahh, once I quit this private tutor job my living expense will... as well as my university tuition... What a troublesome world to live in... I originally thought that as long as I could stay by Rina-san's side, I could give up everything else...”

Showing an expression that seemed as if she was about to commit suicide, she mumbled as she got ready to leave.

Rokko grabbed the ball, and threw it at her. It was a head shot, the woman moaned as she fell to the ground.

“Y-You brat...! You're just a lousy busker alright?!...Go to hell!”

Looking at the woman who left that line and hurriedly left, Rokko broke into laughter.

Raising her head, she could see the girl named Rina was looking in her direction as usual. She started clapping with an impressed expression from seeing this.

But – that’s not the expression Rokko wants.

The girl, who always stood by the window and watch Rokko, was Rokko’s most wanted prey. The girl that she wanted to take a big bite from one after another should not have this kind of expression.

I’m definitely going to eat her up one day ---

Rokko smirked within her as she continued dancing.

Soon the night went by, then morning arrived, and then the sun began to set, causing the evening twilight to start rendering the night streets.

“Hello, Rokko-san!”

A little girl came to Rokko’s side.

It was the girl that Rokko was most interested in; Rina.

“Hehe, I ran away from home again, but I’ll go back soon after a while. They probably wouldn’t think that I would dare to escape during the grounding period. That scum father is also busy doing stuff at Skypia so he is not at home right now.”

Rina went on and on talking about her stuff, while watching Rokko dancing.

This is my chance now ---

There wasn’t anyone else in the park; there was only Rokko and Rina by themselves.

To prepare for that incoming moment, Rokko tried to jiggle the balls before jumping on a big ball to balance herself.

However, Rina just blankly gazed at her and didn’t show any expression.

“Children are my food --- I’m going to eat them all, not leaving even one ---”

Shifting from the performance to dancing, Rokko slowly approached Rina awkwardly like a puppet attached by strings.

“Guru Guru, biting from the head downward--- come, come here closer ---”

Moving closer while signing, and then ---

“You look so delicious ---”

When she finally walked up to Rina, Rokko suddenly opened her mouth wide.

“---Are you going to eat me?”

Rokko halted her movement for a moment. Only the melody of the music box could be heard ringing in the background.

“I did promise you that I would save you one day, didn’t I?”

“...”

“You still have that expression of someone longing for salvation. How do you want me to help you Rokko?”

Just let me eat you ---

That way, Rokko would be saved and no longer had to starve.

“I’m gonna eat you --- I’m gonna eat you ---“

Rokko then began moving once again while singing.

“Rina-san!”

Suddenly, the private tutor woman appeared in the park. Even though she said she was going to quit the job, it seemed she couldn’t bring herself to do so in the end.

“Please hurry and go home.”

“It’s okay, Mikajima. They won’t even notice if I stay here a bit longer.”

Mikajima walked closer to Rina, and whispered something to her ear.

“Mom she---...?!“

Rina widened her eyes before hurriedly turning around and dashing straight home, she didn’t even look at Rokko for the last time before she left. Mikajima took a glimpse at Rokko before she left to follow Rina.

The melody of the music box could only echo in solitude throughout the park.

And then soon, the sound of ambulance’s siren slowly approached, and stopped ringing somewhere around Rina’s household.

“I’m gonna eat you... I’m gonna eat you...”

Letting her only chance slip through her hands just like that, the alone Rokko continued dancing. And because of her letting her prey escape, her stomach felt even hungrier.

Just how much longer could she dance?

Above the dancing Rokko, the moon and stars appeared, before soon the sun arrived and then set again.

Together with the night sky, the Skypia that was standing in the far distance emitted a glorious aura; red, blue, yellow lighting kept on changing after another.

“Ahh~ it’s a puppet doll, so cute!~”

“Eh? It looks rather gloomy to me.”

“Tachibana-sensei’s madam’s funeral is today right? How sad, she was still so young...”

“I heard her husband couldn’t even come to the funeral. You see, the Skypia is just about to open right...?”

Dancing to the melody of the music box, Rokko was surrounded by the parents who were on their way taking their child home from kindergarten.

Today a lot of black-colored cars passed by the park today and almost all of the people sitting in the cars and walking past by the park were all dressed in mourning apparel.

While jiggling the balls, Rokko raised her head.

The girl who always watched Rokko by her window wasn’t there today again. In the past few days, she hasn’t showed up even once.

Because her only interesting prey had disappeared from her sight, Rokko’s stomach felt even hungrier.

As the color of sunset became rich, parents began to go home along with their children.

Looking at the children who were waving their hands as they left, Rokko mechanically waved back.

“...?”

The last one remaining was a little girl.

There wasn’t anyone who seemed like her parent around. The little girl was looking at Rokko, she smiled as she walked closer, and then reached out her tiny hand innocently.

“I’m gonna eat you --- I’m gonna eat you---”

What is she giving me? ---

Rokko lowered herself to look at the girl’s eyes ---

“I’m gonna ---”

When she noticed the tiny hat-like object flying out from the little girl’s sleeve, it was already too late.

The dagger that was hidden in her tiny hands stabbed into Rokko's stomach.

"...!"

Pain and powerlessness instantly enveloped her, Rokko dropped to her knees right away.

The hat ornament flew above the smiling little girl, and rapidly swelled up like a balloon. In a blink of an eye, it covered the little girl completely. On top of the hat's surfaces, countless compound eyes appeared. She could see that something was wriggling wildly about within it.

And then, the wrapped hat once again flew up, returned to its original size ---

"With this, I'm relieved. I was originally thinking what I should do next if you were really made out of wood."

Rokko trembled as she raised her head and saw a well-dressed teenage boy appear before her.

It was the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau's (Mr. Hat House).

3.01

The Others

How? ---

I should've killed him already.

I pierced through his chest with my bare hands; there was no way he could have survived that—

Showing a dumbfounded expression, Rokko raised her head to look at (Mr. Hat House).

“So even puppets can feel surprised huh? Unfortunately, as you can see I’m not dead, after all ---“

While speaking, the teenage boy put his hand that was covered in black-colored nematodes in front of his chest.

--- Psshah,

(Mr. Hat House) ripped open a hole in his chest along with his shirt.

“My ability is a substance-manipulation type, capable of softening any type of material, or compressing them to their limits --- and directing that pressured energy to a fixed point to create an explosion. As such, some degree of separation and integration shouldn’t be a problem for me.”

(Mr. Hat House) smiled wryly as he let go, and returned his chest back to normal.

“But still, that was quite a danger for me nonetheless. It sure took me a long time to reattach together the chest that you pierced --- Although usually, to kill a Mushitsuki, one would usually go for its host...but in my case, it might be better if you had gone for the (Mushi) instead, Rokko-san.”

Rokko bit her lips as she held onto the dagger that was stabbed into her abdomen.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. The injury is affecting your internal organs. If you were to pull that out right now, the impact resulted from the action will only make you die even faster.”

“...!”

“You were once a “Frightful enemy”. After all, you were the only one who saw through my ability to transform. Not even the SEPB know this ability of mine.”

(Mr. Hat House) glared at the Rokko’s sweat-soaked face.

Of course, it was impossible to fool her.

Rokko had always been carefully observing the children’s expression. They were always so innocent and pure.

But --- after arriving to this city, she noticed a “monster” was lurking among them. Although he had the shape of a child, his looks were different. He would hide among the children and watch Rokko’s every single move with his cold empty eyes.

After that, she secretly followed this guy who “pretended” to be a child, and saw him transform into a teenage boy as he is now. Since then, she regarded him as a dangerous target.

“I --- really enjoy having fun by myself.”

(Mr. Hat House) began to talk in a relaxed tone as if he was just casually chitchatting as he narrowed his eyes.

When Rokko looked back at the pair of eyes gazing at her, she couldn’t help but feel a chill running down her spine.

Compare to the bright and gentle gaze of the children, his dark pair of eyes were filled with nothing but selfish desires; a pair of eyes from an evil being.

“Because of Tachibana Rina’s help, that kid was finally able to escape from the SEPB’s pursuit. She is just too amazing. I really do feel like I was saved by her.”

Tachibana Rina. It must be the full name of the girl that Rokko was interested in.

“And so... There are only two people left that know of my existence now, and one of them is --- you.”

“---”

“Only if you two were to disappear from this world, I would then be at ease. But that alone is not perfect enough --- The connection between people is a very troublesome thing. No matter who you are, there’s always a relation between you and other individuals. Family, friends, school, society, and even the people who were just living nearby, there’s always a network of relationships. As long as this exists, someone like me who doesn’t belong anywhere in there would only be suspicious to others ... I can’t achieve my purpose with that.”

Rokko clenched her teeth as the taste of blood filled her mouth.

“The moment when I obtained freedom, I finally made up my mind. No, maybe while I was pretending to be others, I probably wasn’t doing it for the sake of hiding my existence... but rather subconsciously preparing everything for this setup...”

“---”

“If I truly wish to be alone, I can only cut down the ties of other people. If I were to become someone else, what would happen to that person’s existence? People will begin to doubt themselves, wondering why is this person different from the one that they had in their memories. And with that --- the relation between people will eventually fall apart.”

“Kill---Kill---“

Rokko repeatedly mumbled that line with hoarse voice.

“You noticed what I was doing, that’s why you came to kill me didn’t you?”

Just as he said, Rokko had noticed his scheme.

Ever since this “monster” appeared among the children, many people had been getting gloomier and darker. She often heard from the people who came to the park saying words like they had mistaken someone or forgotten something, and it just kept on increasing.

Among the children who came to watch Rokko’s performance, there were few that began to show uneasy expressions as well.

And all of it was caused by (Mr. Hat House)’s behavior.

She then realized that the reason why he was pretending to be a resident of the city was all for his experiment. For the sake of stopping his outrageous ambition, she believed the only option was to kill him.

Situations where everyone was driven by doubt and suspicion should never happen. If such an ambition were to succeed, who knows what would become of this world.

“To me, the connection between people is superfluous. Hoping to be forever alone --- was my dream.”

“---“

“You must have an opposite dream compared to mine huh.”

(Mr. Hat House) laughed.

Rokko’s dream ---

When she was young, she had once gotten lost in a foreign amusement park. She couldn’t help but fall into a panic until a passing by busker helped her. To Rokko, who had a language barrier with the natives at that moment, that busker ---

--- Smiled.

Even though their language was different, smiling was universal ---

"Children are my food --- I'm going to eat them all --- not leaving even one."

Her consciousness began to blur from the pain and bleeding. Yet her mouth continued to repeat the lines as if she was dream talking.

“Their smiles... I’ll eat them all--- not leaving even one, I will eat all of the children’s smiles ---“

No matter which country it is, anywhere where a child's smile was born, somewhere else, there must be another smile, and another one after another, birthing from joy and happiness.

To be able to make every child smile ---

--- was Rokko's dream.

"Looks like we are natural enemies to begin with huh."

Smiles were used world-wide, no matter who you were and who you try to communicate with, you could always create a relation with smile.

On the other hand, what (Mr. Hat House) was hoping to do was --- sever such a link.

Just as he said, their relationship --- couldn't be described as anything other than natural enemies.

"Farewell, Rokko-san."

After (Mr. Hat House) said that line, he leisurely turned around. But immediately he stopped his steps and raised his head in a direction.

"Ahh, this sense of 'distortion'... It seems like a new Mushitsuki was given birth around here huh. Well, it has nothing to do with me anymore since I no longer belong to the SEPB."

(Mr. Hat House) murmured to him as he walked out of the park.

And then, the dagger that was stabbed into Rokko's abdomen twitched.

"...!"

Within the dagger, the black-colored nematodes were wriggling about.

--- Capable of softening any type of material, or compressing them to their limits --- and directing that pressured energy to a fixed point to create a explosion.

The words that (Mr. Hat House) had spoken rang through her mind for an instant.

If she were to pull it out right now, she might possibly faint and die from the heavy bleeding. However, if she were to leave it there, the explosion would kill her immediately. It seemed like (Mr. Hat House) had already considered these possibilities, that's why he chose the dagger as his weapon.

"Uuagh...!"

Without a second of hesitation, Rokko one-handedly pulled the dagger out. Blood spattered as pain almost overwhelmed her consciousness. However, she still managed to throw the dagger up high into the air at the last minute.

The dagger, which flew into the sky, was instantly compressed by an invisible force --- creating a huge explosion.

Rokko was blown away completely by the impact of the explosion into an iron post. She gradually raised her hands which were wearing a pair of white gloves.

Blood continued to gush out from the wound on her abdomen. In front of her, a long slender stick flew into the air. Looking closely, one would notice that it was not any ordinary stick, but rather the figure of a stick insect that divided its body into several segments. Transparent thread coming from the stick insect's body pierced into Rokko's abdomen like living beings.

Through manipulating the threads, she instantly stitched the wound on her inner organs and skin.

"Hua...Hua..."

It seemed she barely managed to stop the blood right before she fell into a state of shock. But, it might be because of her losing so much blood in such a short amount of time, her consciousness was slowly becoming hazy as she felt powerlessness throughout her entire body.

I can't stay here like this ---

(Mr. Hat House) had just said, there were only two people left hindering him. Other than Rokko, the only one left who knew of his existence must be the girl who helped him ---

Tachibana Rina

I will never let him kill that child.

She then inadvertently remembered, when Rina had come to see her for the first time during the night -- for the sake of sending the precious child home, she was quietly followed her from behind. But then, after she encountered (Mr. Hat House), her target was changed.

"That child is --- mine---!"

Rokko took a leap, and jumped high into the sky.

Bam!

She landed hard onto a resident's house's roof before raising her head. Above Rokko, whom stretched her arms, her (Mushi) was floating above. The stick insect's threads were wrapped around her body, pulling her like a puppet doll.

Even if her body couldn't pull out any strength, it wouldn't cause a problem for her. Her (Mushi) could strengthen the physical ability of the object its threads were hanging, and manipulate them.

"I'll eat you---"

Due to the explosion from before, many crowds began to gather at the park Rokko was at. Rokko then took another leap, jumping from one building's roof to another.

Very soon, she arrived at the house where Rina would always be, next to her window watching. Looking from above, she could see that the Tachibana family was holding a funeral.

"Where's Milady Rina?"

"She just asked where her father might be. Could she possibly...?"

"At Skypia...?"

After she finished eavesdropping on the conversation between a relative and a reception staff, Rokko raised her head.

She burst into a dash on the roof's ceiling, running towards the city center in at a blinding speed. Although (Mr. Hat House) was capable of transforming his looks, his body's condition should be the same.

As long as Rokko, who had the absolute advantage in speed, could arrive there first, she should still be able to make it in time.

Crossing through the Akamaki City in a straight line, Rokko dashed towards the observation tower. Behind her back was the big sunset, sinking midway into the horizon.

As she got closer and closer to the city center, the streets became wider as the amount of high buildings increased dramatically. But none of those bothered Rokko, she continued to jump onto the roofs of those buildings and advanced.

"My--My food..."

Even though she already used her (Mushi)'s ability to supplement her physical capacity, she was powerless in regard to her mental condition. Not to mention she really did lose quite a lot of blood. Every movement that she made, she could feel blood ooze throughout her wounds along with pain.

But, I must stop him ----

The most delicious gourmet she had always been looking for, she hadn't even eaten it yet.

The little girl who always stood by her window watching her.

Compared to rest of the children in this city, the girl who Rokko was most interested in --- Tachibana Rina ---

"Hua...Huaa!"

Rokko landed on top of a building facing the observation tower.

The tower that was made of tempered glass three hundred sixty degrees all around, standing mightily at the center of the streets, pointing directly at the heavens. When the sun set, it should be enveloped by overwhelming neon lights coming from cannon-like lighting devices on the ground.

If I don't hurry, it'll be too late ---

Rokko furiously leaped from above the high building.

The pale-faced puppet flew across the sky of Akamaki City. Even though there were many crowds below, no one seemed to have noticed the leaping Mushitsuki in the sky.

“...!”

Rokko broke through the glass, and fell into the interior of Skypia. With her strengthened legs, she managed to arrive at the intermediate level of the tower.

“Ugh...!”

Just then, a large amount of blood was spewed out from her wound. Rokko immediately took a protective posture as she stood up.

The interior of the tower before opening was shrouded in silence

Is Rina really here? If she is, is she above or below...? ---

“!”

Just at that instant, a huge quake echoed above her. It sounded as if it was coming from a far distance above.

It seemed like the something must have happened at the very top. She immediately turned to look at the two elevators; perhaps it was broken, the signal indicating the floors were all off.

Rokko walked towards the metal gate separating the gallery hall and higher level, and forcefully pulled them open with bare hands.

Just as she had expected, there also existed the emergency stairway used by staff and security personnel.

Rokko followed the stairs and ran upward. Every floor she would push open the door to check if Rina was at the floor or not.

And after who knows how many time she ran back and forth of each floor's emergency stairs and hall ---

“---Rokko?”

Amidst the exhibition hall filled with restaurants, a little girl turned her head around. It was Rina.

Rokko opened her mouth and started laughing, Rina was surprised for a bit before running to her with a smile.

“Why are you here?”

“I’m here to eat you ---”

Putting on her usual puppet movements, Rokko stretched her arms as she walked closer to Rina as well.

But then ---

An explosion shook the whole floor.

With an alien-like strength that surpassed far beyond a human’s ability, Rokko struck Rina with her full force, almost crushing the entire wall and ceiling.

“I won’t be fooled by you again!”

Rina quickly took a step back in the nick of time, dodging Rokko’s attack.

“---You’re pretty sharp huh, Rokko-san.”

The girl who said that line, her eyes were dyed pitch black from the overflowing selfish ambition within.

The Rina that Rokko knew would never show such expression.

“What have you done to that child...(Mr. Hat House)?!”

“I’ve already killed her --- though I wanted to say that. As a reward to you, Rokko-san. Tachibana Rina is currently at the highest floor, I really didn’t expect... you would catch up before I reach her.

I made it ---

Rokko squeezed out her strength, and attacked towards (Mr. Hat House) who had Rina’s figure.

But in the next second, the floor’s window glass suddenly scattered. Something huge that appeared immediately charged at Rokko’s body out of the blue.

“Rina, are you okay?!”

Appearing from the window was a little boy.

And the thing that sent Rokko flying was a huge centipede; it must be that boy’s (Mushi). It seemed like he have climbed all the way up here through the outer wall with his centipede.

“Ugh..!”

Blood poured out from her abdomen like fountain, Rokko’s consciousness blurred for a moment.

(Mr. Hat House) turned to look at the boy that appeared, and showed a smile.

"Kazufusa... help me!"

"G-Got it!"

Although she didn't know who that boy was, it seemed like he knew Rina. And right now, he thought (Mr. Hat House) was Rina herself.

If she were to face two Mushitsuki straight on, it would be too much even for her.

Just when she was thinking what she should do under such a disadvantage, a crispy sound of footwear suddenly echoed.

"...?"

That sound of footwear clicking against the floor, it seemed like the little boy and (Mr. Hat House) had also heard them.

Three Mushitsuki's line sight, as if attracted by a magnet, all turned towards the emergency stairs at the same time.

The sound echoed again and again, slowly approaching the floor where they were at.

"....."

And at last, the person who appeared in front of them, was a little girl so gorgeous one couldn't even gaze straight at.

Wearing a full-colored mourning outfit, her long hair swayed by the wind blowing through the opened windows, transparent tears rolling down her cheeks as she stared quietly at these three Mushitsuki.

"R-Rina..? Who is this --- then?"

"Hello, young lady."

It seemed like due to the reason that the original have appeared, (Mr. Hat House) suddenly gave up and stopped mimicking. After the huge hat covered him completely and resized, he had already returned to his original young teenage figure. It looked like that hat was his (Mushi) which was capable of producing those black-colored nematodes.

On the other hand, looking at the girl who she had been eagerly searching for appearing before her, Rokko stood up trembling, walking straight towards her with her awkward movements.

"C-Children are my food --- I'm going to eat them all --- not leaving even one."

Performing her techniques to the best of her ability, she slowly walked towards the girl.

She had been searching, and searching ---

Ever since the moment she saw her standing next to her window, she had been thinking ---

More beautiful than anyone else --

Stronger than anyone else –

Purer than anyone else, that girl's smile would definitely ---

"--- Guru Guru, biting from the head downward--- come, come here closer ---"

Cracking her neck side to side as she moved closer and closer.

In the middle of the hall that was almost completely destroyed, the puppet started dancing.

Even though it was out of the tune with the surrounding sceneries, the succinct performance rooted Rina to the ground, not able to avert her eyes the slightest.

And then, finally ---

"...Yeah, I gotta save you right."

Rina smiled.

A tear flashed down Rokko's cheeks.

Her empty stomach was instantly filled as strength fueled her body.

Just as she had expected.

This girl --- Tachibana Rina's smile would definitely bring more smiles to the world.

Rokko --- a traveling busker who wished to see everyone's smiles, a Mushitsuki harboring a dream that could never be realized ---

--- was saved by a girl's smile.

Why are they here?

In front of Rina who came to Skypia for a certain “reason”, three Mushitsuki appeared.

“Rina! I came here to tell you something—but, what in the world is going on here?!”

The boy who was standing on a giant centipede, Hibino Kazufusa, shouted out to her. A Mushitsuki boy who was once cowardly trembling in a corner from fear and despair, but after a short journey of escape with Rina, had regained the confidence and the courage to survive.

“Thank you, young lady. Because of your help, I really seemed to have escaped from SEPB’s control.”

The elegant young man said as he threw a piece of concrete that was infested with black-colored nematodes.

A former member of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, (Mr. Hat House).

A teenage boy who desired to have fun by himself and wished to be alone, he wanted a world where he doesn’t need to interfere with others or have others interfering with him. The plan that Rina came up with really helped him, he was so happy that he was even trembling in joy right now.

“--- as long as I can kill you all, I will be able to obtain eternal solitude!”

The area Rina stood on was blown away by a huge explosion.

In the nick of time, a teenage girl, with a stick-like (Mushi) hanging above her head, swung by and grabbed Rina, avoiding the explosion.

“That guy is an enemy --- Children’s enemy ---“

A traveling busker, Rokko ---

A puppet doll who had been dancing nonstop in the park, constantly starving herself, she, however, accompanied by the melody of the music box, was saved from Rina’s smile just a moment ago. Those eyes that had almost lost its luster began to light up once again.

“Kill Rina? Why does the SEPB wants to kill her---?!”

“You there, centipede boy. I purposely let you go, why did you have to come back... What a foolish child...”

“Enemy --- Enemy ---“

In front of Rina, the three Mushitsuki broke into a free-for-all.

These three people had all been lost, seeking for salvation.

After noticing their pain, Rina saved them.

--- That was what she thought.

But, it was not enough.

“(Mr. Hat House)-san!”

Rina called out to the teenage boy who wore a hat ornament on his head.

“You still ---“

“Yes, although you have helped me, it’s still not enough. I’m a very selfish person you see...”

While guarding against Rokko and Kazufusa, (Mr. Hat House) took a glimpse at Rina. His eyes were dyed black by selfish ambition, so dark that it sent chills down people’s spines.

“Just obtaining freedom and loneliness could no longer satisfy me anymore. In order to achieve perfect solitude, I --- will make others enveloped in solitude as well---“

“...!”

“Remember this, smart and beautiful young lady, even if you can’t remember, you have to carve this fear you’re feeling right now deep into your heart!”

(Mr. Hat House) narrowed his pair of dark eyes, and grinned. The hat he was wearing suddenly swelled up until it covered down to the corner of his lips.

“Your kindness is a light which illuminates the darkness, many who have lost their ways will come to you, and you probably will not hesitate to rescue them. But ---“

The concrete the teenage boy threw approached Rina.

Rina quickly stepped aside, barely dodging it if it weren’t for Rokko. Right before he threw that piece of concrete, Rokko leaped at him and kicked his arm, causing the path of the flying concrete to change, exploding at a distance a bit further away.

“One day --- those people that you saved will eventually devour those beautiful pairs of wing of yours and make you fall; deep into the abyss.”

(Mr. Hat House)’s dark prophetic statement rode with the wind, echoing throughout Skypia.

“But you no longer have to wait for them to devour you, I’ll devour you alive here myself!”

(Mr. Hat House) leaped over the raising smoke, and jumped in front of Rina.



But then, in that instant, a giant centipede came from the side.

“Do you think I will let you kill Rina just like that?!!”

“It seems like the cowardly centipede has become stronger huh. Do you think you can become her knight?”

(Mr. Hat House) grabbed the floor and pulled it forcefully. In an instant, the concrete floor stretched up like rubber, forming a blockade against the giant centipede’s fangs.

“Kill --- Kill ---!”

Meanwhile, Rokko leaped down from above with a kick. (Mr. Hat House) easily tilted his head and dodged the attack.

“Too slow, Puppet-san. Where’s that terrifying fast speed of yours from before?!”

The concrete sheet he pulled covered Rokko entirely. (Mr. Hat House) then grabbed and pulled it again, causing the elastic concrete sheet to cave in and send Rokko flying from its recoil. Rokko was blasted against the wall, crashing through numerous walls before dropping to the ground.

“...!”

(Mr. Hat House) then once again threw a piece of concrete infused with nematodes at the dumbfounded Rina.

I won’t make it ---

In the view of Rina who was rooted to the ground, a giant centipede’s shadow arose.

“Uwaaahhh!”

Perhaps it might be because of his judgment that a normal defensive approach wouldn’t be able to save her in time, Kazufusa’s centipede roared out loud along with him as it slammed its giant body against the floor.

A huge quake shook the entire Skypia, and the floor Rina and the others were standing on began to crumble.

Above Rina who was dazedly falling down along with the floor, a piece of concrete narrowly flew by, exploding a short distance away.

“---”

The body which had lost the support of the floor instantly succumbed to gravity and fell downward.

Just like that time when she was jumping off from the school’s rooftop along with her childhood acquaintance, Shirotoni Reiji –

As well as the time when she fell down with (Mr. Hat House) from the sluice ---

That instant feeling of release and fresh breeze enveloped her completely.

This comfort which she felt, gave her an illusion of freedom and liberation.

But, what she was feeling right now, those were definitely no illusions.

“---!”

While still falling downward, Rina clenched her lips.

The present now was different from the past.

In this present, she no longer had a place to go back to.

Within the current Rina, there was a new “power” slumbering.

She could only use this power, to move forward, towards a new paradise.

That’s right, not just her, but every one of those who sought salvation ---

I have to find a place where everyone can live at ease ---

“Rina...!”

Kazufusa’s voice which came out of nowhere brought Rina back to her senses.

At the same time, the centipede’s body wrapped around Rina’s body, shielding her from the fall and impact. It also used its body to protect Rina from the falling debris.

The huge explosion and the blast caused her to go deaf for a moment, whilst the sudden free fall caused her to lose her sense of balance.

Rina, after being released from the centipede’s grip, shakily took a step onto the floor.

“Uhh---Ughhh---!”

Meanwhile, Kazufusa landed onto a pile of debris nearby, moaning in pain. It seemed like he used the centipede to protect Rina rather than himself.

“Kill---Kill---!”

“Young lady, why won’t you save me again?”

On the other side of the floor, the puppet covered in blood was fighting against the undamaged (Mr. Hat House).

As the concrete debris fell from the sky like raindrops, Rokko's fists and kicking continued to strike forwards like a roaring gust. (Mr. Hat House) carefully observed and dodged every single attack she made, before leisurely turning to his side to look at Rina.

"You're the only one who can help me achieve true solitude."

Thump --- (Mr. Hat House)'s legs suddenly stomped hard against the floor. His feet sank into the ground, causing Rokko's furious fist to narrowly miss. He then took advantage of the reaction force from the ground and leaped upward, using his knee to strike right into Rokko's chin.

The puppet was sent flying right through the hole in the ceiling, crashing into the ceiling of the higher floor. The pale-faced teenage girl couldn't even put on a protective posture as she fell directly down to the ground.

"Kazufusa... Rokko..."

Rina stared dazedly at the two beaten Mushitsuki --- before glaring at (Mr. Hat House).

"I...I'm not as kind as you think I am. If beaten I will fight back."

"Your courage, I will keep that in mind."

(Mr. Hat House) slowly approached Rina.

"Damn it...!"

The centipede charged over, but was instantly repelled back by the explosion caused by the infused concrete.

"Kill--!"

Rokko leaped and jumped in from behind, kicking right into (Mr. Hat House)'s back, but the teenage boy's body suddenly softened like rubber, using elasticity to bounce the pale-faced puppet girl back.

"Come, save me one more time ---"

The teenage boy raised his hat, showing his face.

Not just his eyes --- but (Mr. Hat House) himself, his entire being was dyed chaotic from dark ambition. Throughout his body, black-colored nematodes could be seen wriggling.

Looking at the eyes of this Mushitsuki approaching her, Rina finally realized something.

He was still looking for salvation.

He was afraid of everything, and couldn't find an escape, that's why he was pleading at his only hope, which was Rina.

“---”

And there was only one thing that Rina could do for him,

Using the “power” that she had just obtained, to save him ---

She silently raised her hand at (Mr. Hat House).

On her slender fingertip, a tiny crawling shadow appeared.

That shadow spread its wings, softly flapping --- and then suddenly swelled up.

In that instant, that floor’s air pressure dramatically dropped.

“Uh-!”

A shockwave then shook the entire building.

(Mr. Hat House) who was widening his eyes from shock was blasted away from the impact against his abdomen. After making a flip through the air, he crashed through the walls separating the halls and slammed hard into the tempered glass reflecting the view of the Akamaki city’s streets.

Rokko and Kazufusa, who fell to the ground, were covering their faces from the overwhelming gust. Everything surrounding Rina was blasted away radially.

After a moment, a decoration hat slammed against the glass next to (Mr. Hat House).

Ruptured into pieces by the impact, the hat splattered against the glass wall and began to leak an appalling amount of fluid.

“Ahh, I see ---”

(Mr. Hat House) lay paralyzed on the floor while smiling:

“So that “distortion” I felt at that time... It was from you...”

Not only just (Mr. Hat House), both Rokko and Kazufusa who raised their heads were gazing dumbfounded at Rina.

In front of Rina, an abnormal monster suddenly appeared.

Akin to the lower part of a giant sphere that was cut in half, with a size that could easily cover a human being and with seven protruding black-colored dots on its surface --- a half-sphere sized ladybug.

“Rina... you became a Mushitsuki too...?”

Kazufusa’s stunned voice began to echo throughout the floor.

Just as he said,

That red-colored ladybug was no doubt --- Rina's (Mushi).

"Yeah, just then..."

Rina smiled as she replied.

She had also become a Mushitsuki.

Why did it turn out this way --- even if she were to explain to them, it would be meaningless anyway. That's why Rina only smiled without saying anything else.

Rina had obtained a new power.

Even if she wanted to escape, she couldn't.

No matter how she desperately she longed for salvation, no one ever came to save her.

This new power was so strong that it was enough to save others.

"(Mr. Hat House)-san... Despite saying all that, you already knew didn't you? The one, who became a Mushitsuki from before, was me."

Under Rina's gaze, (Mr. Hat House) slightly creased his brows.

The teenage boy who was on his knees did not answer Rina's question, just merely showing a shallow smile. Rina watched his eyes that had been tainted by corrupted ambition lose their luster.

"Your eyes, till the end, still say that you want someone to save you ..."

(Mr. Hat House) raised his face, and smirked.

"... I was a little afraid, to be honest... For the sake of making myself alone, I had to make the whole world alone... If such thing were to really come true, I seriously wouldn't know what to do..."

Next to the bright smiling face, the bleeding (Mushi) slowly disappeared into the air ---

"But, thank goodness... the dream of become alone, only belongs to me now..."

As if he was carrying something really precious, the Mushitsuki teenage boy lifted one of his hands in front of his chest.

"Thank you... With this...I will be able to monopolize this solitude all by myself now..."

The eyes of (Mr. Hat House) who was showing a calm smile, quietly gazed straight at Rina.

After losing his (Mushi), the teenage boy who had lost his memories and emotions became silent. His eyes no longer had any luster in them, his focus pinned to one point. Comparing his figure to Rokko's performance; he was closer to being a real puppet.

“ ... ”

Rina also looked back at the eyes of this teenage boy who had become a Fallen.

In front of her, was an end of a Mushitsuki who was crushed by his dream.

--- “One day --- those people that you saved will eventually devour those beautiful pairs of wing of yours and make you fall; deep into the abyss.”

He wanted her to forever remember that line, and even said that, if she couldn't, she had to carve this fear deep into her heart.

Rina had already carved it deep down her heart.

Rather than the fear she felt was she was being attacked, the fear she's looking straight at right now, this fear, she had already deeply carved it into her heart.

After becoming a Mushitsuki, she herself who had committed a “sin”, who could no longer return to who she was --- other than moving forwards, there's no other way.

In the view of Rina who stood in silence, the busker teenage girl slowly stood up.

“... Well, looks like we're done here.”

A voice filled with relief, came from none other, than Rokko herself.

Both Rina and Kazufusa couldn't help but widen their eyes to look at her. Meanwhile, Rokko casually looked back at them and shrugged her shoulders.

“Heh, sorry about that. I've decided that I will be performing until I could see the smile of the child I'm interested in from this city. Rokko, I, am still in the middle of training you see?”

“Eh...”

“It was a really beautiful smile you have there, thank you for the meal. If someday we were to meet at some other city, you must definitely come to watch Rokko's performance again okay?~”

After speaking those lines with a mischievous tone, Rokko winked at them. That figure walking rhythmically down the emergency stairway was no different than any human being.

Seeing the teenage girl who walked away like a gust of wind, Rina and Kazufusa exchanged looks with each other for quite a while.

“Hah---”

Unknown to which side, someone suddenly burst out laughing.

It was only a matter of time before the commotion that had happened here at Skypia one hundred and eighty meters above the ground was found out by the people below.

They must escape before they were noticed then.

“Why did you come back, Kazufusa?”

After laughing for quite a while, Rina asked. The Mushitsuki boy replied with a little embarrassment.

“I...didn't want to just run, but rather help other Mushitsuki if I can. Before leaving, I wanted to come tell Rina that, so...”

“Help other Mushitsuki?”

“I think there must be many Mushitsuki out there that were feeling afraid from SEPB's pursuits --- just like me from before. I wanted to help those people as well.”

“Is that so?”

Rina shook her slender shoulder-length hair, while overlooking Akamaki city's streets.

“I will come with you then.”

“Eh..?”

“I also wished to help other Mushitsuki. As long as it's within my reach --- I wanted to help as many of them as possible ...”

For the sake of those Mushitsuki seeking salvation --

And also, for herself --

Maybe perhaps, it was also for the sake of “atonement” --- Even so Rina still hoped that there was a meaning behind this power that she obtained.

“... Is that... Rina's dream?”

Upon hearing Kazufusa's question, Rina narrowed her eyes for a moment.

And then, she nodded.

“Yeah, it was because of this that I became a Mushitsuki.”

After speaking with a firm tone, her expression eased.

“--- But, before we go, I have to bid farewell to many people.”

Rina's smile, under the glittering sunset, shined faintly.

When Rina returned to her home, everyone who had come for the funeral in the backyard all gasped from shock.

“Milady...What happened to you?! Are you hurt ---?”

“H-Hey! Someone please go and call the police---!”

Rina, who was wrapped in tattered mourning outfits, ignored the gasping visitors, and ran straight in.

She ran into the room where the funeral was being held, looking at her mother’s portrait before silently praying.

Good bye, Mom ---

She most likely would not come back to this house ever again. That’s why, the first thing she wanted to do, was to bid farewell to her mother.

I’m sorry, that I couldn’t save you ---

Ignoring those cold gazes from the consoling people, Rina ran once again, up the stairs into her own bedroom.

“Rina-san---“

Standing in the corner of the room, there was Mikajima wearing a mourning outfit.

Rina walked past the private tutor, before stopping in front of the window.

She wanted to carve this twilight scene she saw from here, deep down her memory and eyes.

This scenery that she could see through this window, was Rina’s everything until yesterday. Every day she stood here and looked through the window, dreaming of a future someday when she could finally be free.

“Are you leaving this house?”

Mikajima asked quietly.

Rina didn’t turn around.

Let’s paint it down ---

This thought flashed through her mind.

Before that, I have to learn how to paint first ---

Not with pencils but rather with pigments, painting it down onto a piece of canvas. This scenery that she gazed at every day only existed in her heart. Neither camera nor photo could fully capture this scenery within her heart.

And don't forget, this emotion I'm feeling right now. I will recall them altogether, and paint them all down.

Just then, a seven dotted ladybug landed onto Rina's shoulder. Looking closely, one would notice that this creature was significantly different from the original insect.

"Why... do you not hesitate dirtying that beautiful profile of yours, and wear such tattered clothing ---"

"..."

"Also, that (Mushi) ---"

"..."

"You've changed. --- But in my eyes, you are still as beautiful as ever."

Rina turned around, preparing to leave the room.

"Please take me with you."

On hearing Mikajima's words, Rina halted.

"I wish to forever stay by your side."

Rina turned around, showing a smile. Her gaze slowly shifted onto the teddy bear on her bed.

"I'll give that stuffed animal to you. If you really want to come with me, just think of that bear as me."

"Are you going to abandon me?"

"Mikajima you're a very strong person, I feel like if I were to stay by your side, I will only make you weaker."

"..."

"From now on, you have to live for yourself."

Mikajima clenched her lips slightly. It was as if she was signing that if that was what Rina wished for, she would follow that order until the end, and suppress her own aspirations.

"I will live for Mushitsuki."

I've already decided.

After encountering with those three Mushitsuki, she finally understood.

Every Mushitsuki was moaning from their heart.

They needed a shelter where they can rest,

That's why Rina --- she, who could hear those moaning within, would definitely create such a place for them.

It was for this purpose that she became a Mushitsuki --- She hoped she could think like that.

“Oh yeah, gotta go to school and bid farewell to that guy as well...”

The boy who had been acquaintance with her since childhood --- Shirotani Reiji's face flashed through her mind for an instant.

She could no longer act spoiled towards the environment surrounding her till yesterday anymore.

She, who have committed a certain “sin”, from today onward, must march towards a new destination ---

“Good bye---“

Towards the private tutor who was standing there blankly,

And --- the last sunset, that she's seeing through that tiny window for the last time.

Rina gave her brightest smile, and silently bid her farewell.

4.00

Rina The Last

“---And that’s it.”

Sitting at the end of the hallway of her apartment, Rina finished what she wanted to say with a lazy tone.

Shiika, who sat next to her, blinked her eyes a few times.

“...Eh?”

“Eh’ what? I’m done. This is the story of how I became a Mushitsuki. I’m finished.”

“B-But...”

The most important part is missing --- She seemed to have wanted to say that.

The story that Rina had spoken was missing some part in the middle.

How did Rina become a Mushitsuki?

And why did she appear at Skypia at that time?

It felt like certain important parts were secretly cut away.

“Didn’t I tell you? I really couldn’t remember clearly what had happened at that time. It all felt like a dream, I really couldn’t tell what was real or not.”

“...”

“B-But---”

Shiika still looked puzzled. Rina reached her hand to gently rub her head. Although feeling embarrassed, she still closed her eyes to feel the warmth coming from her palm against her.

“I think I was destined to become a Mushitsuki.”

“Destined... to become a Mushitsuki?”

“Those three that I’ve met, Centi --- which is Kazufusa, Rokko, and (Mr. Hat House)... there’s nothing special about them. But ever since I started to encounter different kinds of Mushitsuki --- somewhere during that time, I started to have the same dream as them.”

Shiika raised her head, gazing at Rina’s profile.

“To ‘create a place where Mushitsuki belong’ ...?”

“Mhm!”

Rina smiled as she nodded her head.

That’s right, the Mushitsuki she met at that time, they weren’t any special.

All Mushitsuki were suffering, seeking salvation.

The Shiika in front of her right now was also the same. Rina could clearly hear the moaning from her heart, so clear that even her heart would start to ache in pain.

Those moaning, from the people seeking salvation, would resonate with her heart ---

If it would resonate, it must prove that Rina herself must ---

“Okay, it’s time to sleep, go sleep!”

“What about you Rina?”

“I’ll go wash my face first. You can go back to the bedroom first.”

Shiika nodded and stood up. While walking through the dim hallway, she suddenly turned around as if she remembered something.

“Goodnight, Rina”

Seeing Shiika show a gentle warm smile, Rina felt relieved. It seemed like all those conversations had helped her calm down a lot, which was a relief.

“Mm, goodnight.”

For some reason, she felt at ease whenever she was with Shiika. Was it because she said that they had similar dreams?

Constantly fighting, constantly consuming her dream, she started to feel her tired heart heal a little just by staying around her.

But it didn’t seem to have worked that well as she had expected.

Just when she was about to stand up, she lost her consciousness for a moment. The heart that was being constantly devoured by her (Mushi) twitched in pain. The past memories flashed through her mind like lightning.

In front of Rina whose consciousness began to blur, a little girl’s figure appeared at the end of this dim hallway.

An illusion displayed by her almost overwhelmed mind.

That was --- the figure of Rina who had just become a Mushitsuki.

“.....”

Step by step, the young Rina slowly approached through the dim hallway.

That tiny figure was crying.

Making a whining sound, weeping with a hoarse voice,

She, who was lost, was longing for a hand that could bring her out of this maze, sobbing as loud as she could.

“...!”

The crying Rina walked past the current Rina’s body.

Rina instantly turned her head around, but found nothing but darkness behind her. Cold sweat formed on her forehead as she regained consciousness.

“---I’m sorry, Shiika.”

Rina quietly whispered.

She lied.

Everything that had happened, until now she still clearly remembered them. She would never be able to forget.

On that day, the young Rina cried.

The Rina, who was also so strong and stubborn, was shedding tears that no one had ever seen for the first time in her life until her voice became hoarse and broken.

“... Don’t worry, I will give you a place where you belong...”

These words that she uttered, was it for Shiika?

Or ---

“I’ll definitely...”

Her life,

Her dream,

They existed for this purpose.

After tonight has passed, Rina would make up her mind.

Even if it cost her life, she would definitely create a place where Mushitsuki could live happily at.

“It was for this that I’ve been fighting till now.”

Fighting so much that she had already grown tired of it,

She encountered many people, but also lost many comrades.

And at last --- She met Anmoto Shiika, a teenage girl who she could call ‘friend’ for the first time.

This path she had chosen, and the road she had walked, there was no regret in them.

Rina proudly raised her head, and puffed her chest.

“Yeah, I’ll definitely --- win!”

Covering up the pain in her heart with a face full of smiles, Rina moved forward.

Epilogue

A Ladybird

The sound of wooden fish echoed intermittently. [TL note: Wooden fish, also known as a Chinese temple block, is a wooden percussion instrument.]

Many people wearing mourning clothing appeared one after another, before disappearing one after another.

Rina, who was also wearing black-colored funeral clothing, dazedly lowered her head.

Through the tabernacle, many of Tachibana's relatives came before her mother's portrait, held their hands together and paid their respects before switching.

Next to Rina, was supposed to be the seat of the host of today's funeral, yet it was empty.

"....."

Rina raised her head, gazing at her mother's portrait with an empty expression.

Rina's mother, Tachibana Kouyou had silently passed away a few days ago.

She had always been a frail person, that's why the relatives rushed her to get married so that the family's bloodline could be passed along.

It seemed like her mother had been hiding her illness all along. Perhaps she was afraid that if she were hospitalized, Rina would be left all alone with her father. That's why she concealed her condition, silently enduring the father's abuse, little by little chipping away at her body and mind.

Or perhaps, it might be because of Rina's runaway that dealt an unexpected blow to her mother instead.

Her mother, who had finally reached her limits, collapsed and never woke up since then, passed away just like that. She didn't even leave any last words behind.

This life of her mother's, was it happy, meaningful?

Marrying to this kind of man like her father, and enduring for the sake of her family.

When Rina was born, did her mother feel any joy?

"....."

Rina silently stood up, and left the room. No one tried to stop her. All of the adults were looking at her with their pitiful gazes, not even one person tried to hold her steady.

Walking past the entrance, she asked a woman who was responsible for handling the guests:

“Where’s father...?”

The reception lady showed a troubled expression, but still told Rina the truth ---

“Tachibana-sensei he... is probably at a meeting in regard to Skypia’s opening...”

Rina staggered her way out of the gate, adults dressed in mourning all moved away as if they were avoiding her.

Raising her head, she could see the thorn-like tower standing in the distant sky.

Akamaki’s Skypia, it seemed like her father was there.

Rina’s legs immediately turned to Skypia.

But soon came to a halt.

Turning around, she started walking in the opposite direction.

But stopped shortly.

“Uuu...”

Rina’s face began to distort.

What is this emotion??

Is it anger? Sorrow? Or perhaps fear?

Or maybe, it was all of them. These emotions that had been accumulated in her heart, had exploded ever since her mother’s death.

The hourglass within her heart that had been leaking until now --- that last drop of sand inside, had finally spilled.

“Ahh...”

Rina grabbed her head and started groaning.

She really wished to run to her father’s side this instant, and beat the shit out of him.

But as powerless as she was now, if she were to really run to his side, she would only get herself hit ten times more.

What about running away from his side then, to a place where he could never find –

No, that wouldn’t have worked either.

The fact that her pair of legs could never reach anywhere was already proven from her last escape.

“Uuu...Ahh...”

Just then, a sudden chill caused her to embrace herself tightly.

And then --- It would be Rina’s turn.

Her mother died without ever feeling happiness in her life.

The next one to be killed... would definitely be Rina.

“...W-Why ---”

The word that she had been carefully not to say, slowly slipped out from her trembling throat.

“Why isn’t there anyone helping me...”

Up until now, Rina had helped many people.

She even went out her way and helped Mushitsuki as well.

But why would no one come and help her?

“Why...??”

Her teeth began to grind against each other while groaning with a low voice.

“Why..?!!”

And then, just in the next instant ---all the surrounding sound disappeared.

It felt as if her consciousness was pulled apart from her body, causing her mind to fall into chaos.

“---”

Feeling a presence of something lurking in her surroundings, Rina raised her head.

Before her stood a woman.

“—Hey—”

The first thing that entered Rina’s eyes was a big round pair of sunglasses.

And then, the rainbow-colored eyes glowing behind that pair of sunglasses, gazing straight at her.

“Could you tell me --- your dream?”

A tall slender woman, wearing a dark red long coat, stood in front of Rina.

There were still figures of birds flying in the sky, as well as cars speeding on the road near her, but their motions were so slow as if time had frozen in place and made no sound at all.

It was as if Rina and this mysterious woman were isolated in a different dimension.

“What are you thinking... and desiring right now?”

The woman happily curved the corner of her lips as she asked that.

Rina slowly clenched her lips.

Her desire, a wish that she hoped to fulfill from the bottom of her heart --

But then her lips began to move on their own.

Actually, she had been thinking about it since the start.

Every time she helped others, within her heart, she would feel envious of them.

She felt so from the bottom of her heart.

-- Really, really envious.

“I ---”

Her voice was low, yet crystal clear.

A dream that she had been depicting ever since she was a young girl was right near her lips.

“I ... want a place where I belong, a place where I can find happiness...”

It was such a trivial dream.

Was it just too elusive to ask for?

Was it that impossible to come true?

This trivial dream, why couldn't Rina reach it ---

“—it's a very wonderful dream ---”

What happened after that, Rina couldn't remember very clearly.

All she could remember was, after she'd spoken her dream, she felt somewhere deep within her --- something split into two. And that other thing was rampaging within her chest, making her feel extremely anxious.

“—Aha....Ahaha...!”

By the time Rina returned to her senses, she was already dashing wildly on the streets.

Her body felt so hot,

Her heart felt like it was burning.

The unstoppable burning urge made her felt even more anxious, her eyes became bloodshot as well.

“Uh...Aha! Ahaha!”

Even when she fell on her knee, it didn't hurt at all. Rina was showing a distorted expression she'd never had before while running straight to the city's center.

“Uuahh!”

With a gaze similar to that of a beast, she knocked away whoever was in her path.

It wasn't until later that she came to know of this --- It seemed like it was normal for those that were just turned into Mushitsuki by (The Original Three) to go out of control for a period of time. Some of them might even lose their rationality and vent the uncontrollable power at their surroundings.

Rina was most likely in that situation at that time.

Logically speaking, it must be that way.

At that time, she had already lost her rationality and herself because of anger.

Driven by a certain impulse within her, Rina dashed on the streets, wanting to fulfill a certain thought within her as soon as possible.

“Aha! Ahaha!”

After entering the city's center, she finally arrived in front of Skypia.

The securities and staffs working at the entrance noticed the running Rina.

They originally were going stop her, who was charging straight into the Skypia, but hesitated immediately --

“You're Tachibana-sensei's ---“

Taking advantage of this gap, Rina rushed into the Skypia, and got in the elevator.

“Ha..Ha...!”

She couldn't even wait for one more second.

She must hurry.—

Before this overflowing power within her --- exploded.

“Haa!Haa!”

The high-speed elevator soon arrived at the top floor of the observatory.

Accompanied by the electronic sound of the door opening, she saw that man.

“---Rina?”

The person, who turned around, was Rina’s father Kaeki. Surrounding him were his bodyguards and underlings.

The man who killed her mother.

And then --- the man who will kill Rina.

“Uuu---“

She doesn’t want to share the same fate as her mother.

She loathed this man who killed her mother from the bottom of her heart.

If there was no place where she could escape to –

And no one could come to save her –

Then, the only thing she could do, is to save herself with her bare hands before she is killed---

“WWWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!”

In front of the screaming Rina, an abnormal monster appeared.

It was a half-sphere red-colored ladybug with seven black dots on its back, with a size almost similar to a small-sized car, and wings that suddenly spread out glistening in a ruby aura.

The face of her dumbfounded father disappeared on the other end of the impact.

The sorrow that Rina had been suppressing until now, turned into shouts.

The tears she had been enduring all along, overflowed like a flood.



The shockwave storm that blasted everything away mercilessly cleansed the whole observatory floor.

“---”

The ladybug that had completed its duty then disappeared into space.

Rina stood dazedly amidst what was now a ruin.

She couldn't even tell what was there before the shockwave destroyed everything. The elevator was broken, concrete rubble and debris piled up on the floor, and glass was scattered all over the place.

Her father --- Kaeki was lying at the corner of the observatory floor, not moving the slightest and with blood pouring endlessly from his head. Rina didn't even bother checking whether he was dead or not.

Everyone else that was caught in the destruction was lying above the debris.

Rina stood where she was, gazing at her father's appalling figure for quite a while.

“.....”

The anger, anxiousness, and fear she had been feeling just a moment ago had all disappeared. It was as if she had a dream, her mind was surprisingly calm right now.

This scenery in front of her right now, is it the reality?

Could she be hallucinating ever since the moment she talked to that mysterious woman and told her her dream?

But --- the figure of her father lying there motionlessly was an undeniable reality; she could even smell that peculiar smell of blood in the air.

“.....”

She then started walking towards the emergency stairs with heavy footsteps, following the stairs down.

Rina infused more force into her hands.

The strength that allowed her to get revenge against her hated father, a power which let her confront directly against the people who locked her into this birdcage without a means of escape.

Using this power, Rina had finally obtained freedom.

While walking down the stairs, Rina couldn't help but want to laugh.

“—Uu...”

Even though she wanted to laugh, her expression was distorting into something rather dreadful instead.

“Uuuuaa...”

Large tears began to roll down her cheeks nonstop.

“Uuuuwahhhhh ---“

Why?

Why did it have to turn out like this?

In the end, she couldn't escape.

No one came to save her.

That's why, she could only push ahead by herself.

“Waahhhhh, wahhhh—“

She blubbered out.

Come to think of it, she had never cried in front of anyone before.

Even though she was just a kid.

A weak kid who couldn't even save herself.

For the first time ever, she cried like a helpless baby.

“Wahhhhh, wahhhh—“

She had killed her own father.

And if her mother were to have fallen ill solely because of her selfish runaway, then that responsibility would fall on her as well.

For someone like Rina, where could she go to search for her happiness? Where must she go, to find a place where she belongs?

After losing her parents, and no longer knowing where she could go back to, like a kid who was lost, Rina blubbered loudly.

Somewhere in this world, would there be anyone who could hear her cries and reach their hands to her? And as for Rina, does she have any rights to hold those hands?

After walking for a few flight of stairs, her tears dried up.

She then walked few more flight of stairs with a hollow expression, before stumbling upon some people waiting for her arrival.

“R-Rina...?!“

“Hello, young lady...”

“C-Children all are, my food ---!”

Hibino Kazufusa, (Mr. Hat House), and Rokko, these three Mushitsuki were waiting for her.

Rina’s heart began to ache in pain again.

She knew they were seeking salvation.

She also knew that she was the only one who could save them.

Because, the one that was resonating with their pain --- was her own pain, which she hid deep inside her heart.

“.....”

Rina dazedly gazed back at these people who were longing for her helping hands.

Even for someone like Rina, there was still something that she could do.

And that was --- to save them.

Creating a place where they could rest peacefully at.

Let’s make that my dream ---

For someone like her who still wishes to find happiness after committing such a “sin”, this would be the perfect punishment.

Let’s put away my true dream somewhere within my heart, and let it slowly be forgotten.

Rina was thinking as such.

As long as this pain remained within her --- as long as she had not redeemed herself of her sin, this aching pain within her would tell her who needed salvation.

And then for the sake of atoning, even if it is one more person ---

“...Yeah, I gotta save you right.”

And that was how Rina began to harbor a certain trivial dream.

And at the same time, the story of her burying her true dream at the shore of the forgotten.

Tachibana Rina,

A leader known as the (Ladybird), leading many Mushitsuki behind her back, a teenage girl who devoted herself to the fate of battling against the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

Just like that -

-- strongly smiled.

ムシウタ

00. 夢の始まり

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